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DENMAN
THOMPSON'S



Denman Thompson

OLD HOMESTEAD

Written from the CELEBRATED PLAY
"THE OLD HOMESTEAD,"

(BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.)

THE SELECT SERIES;
NO. 23. JUNE, 1889.

STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS,
NEW YORK.

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DENMAN THOMPSON'S

OLD HOMESTEAD.

Written from the Celebrated Play of

"THE OLD HOMESTEAD."

NEW YORK:
STREET & SMITH, Publishers,
31 Rose Street.

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY
FROM
THE BEQUEST OF
EVERT JANSEN WENDELL
1918

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PREFACE.

It is now about fourteen years ago that an actor lay ill of rheumatism in Pittsburgh. He had no money—he had been too generous, too sympathetic for the distress of others, to have been able to accumulate any—and, what was worse, the disease he was suffering from threatened to incapacitate him for any future work in his profession; for one must be agile and nimble to be of much use on the stage.

He knew, however, that it would not mend matters to worry, and so he turned his thoughts on pleasanter things. And of all pleasant things, can there be any quite as pleasant as home, when one is far away from it, and in trouble? The tortured actor thought not, and he let his fancy take him to that far-away New Hampshire homestead, where four generations of his ancestors had lived, and where he had seen so many happy days as a boy.

He brought to his bed of pain the shaded lanes, the dusty roads, the hilly pastures, the peaked roofs, the school-house, the meeting-house, and the familiar faces of dear old Swanzey; and, in spite of his pain, he lived again amid the scenes of his boyhood. And he thought so much of the little New Hampshire village, and of the homestead where his father and mother still lived, that, when he became well again, he could not drive them from his mind, and the impulse grew strong within him to weave into a

story the incidents of the sweet country life which had beguiled him as he lay on his back, racked with pain.

And he did as he was moved to do. He invented no fanciful stories, but brought together some of those incidents of real life which had made him laugh and cry as he thought of them; and the result was a play which hundreds of thousands of persons have laughed and cried over, and which to-day is nightly packing the largest theater in New York with people who have never been inside of a theater before.

A play which clergymen go to see, and then advise their congregations to witness.

A play which the fashion of the great metropolis never tires of seeing.

A play which gray-beards and children alike enjoy.

A play which, during the fourteen years of its existence, has become a household word from Maine to California, and from Florida to Puget Sound.

The actor was DENMAN THOMPSON, and the play is "THE OLD HOMESTEAD."

But, as an old theater-goer declared, after witnessing the performance: "There is no acting, and there is no play. It is all real—IT IS LIFE ITSELF."

And the statement was true. DENMAN THOMPSON merely lives the life on the stage that he lives in truth every summer when he goes to the old homestead in the New Hampshire hills. He calls himself JOSHUA WHITCOMB on the stage, and even that is the name of a real personage—or rather of two real personages melted into one. The other persons of the play are all actualities, and the visitor to Swanzey will have them pointed out to him, if they are alive, or described to him, if they be dead.

And the incidents—the accusation of robbery directed against the innocent boy, his shame, and leaving of home; the dear old Aunt Tilda, who has been courted for thirty

years by the mendacious Cy Prime, who has never had the courage to propose; the fall of the country boy into the temptations of city life, his recovery after a time by the good old man, who braves all the perils of the great metropolis to find the boy who has gone away from him—all these are FACTS.

But in the play there is not room for all the facts of this pure and wholesome story, which as a simple truth has sent more than one wayward son away from the theater to write the first letter in months to the troubled parents at the old homestead, and therefore it has been made into a story which shall contain all that has been left untold in the play. The story, like the play, breathes the pure air of the country, and all that is merely suggested in the play is amplified in the story.

There is no love in the play. But does anybody suppose that there was no room in Swanzey for the divine passion? Indeed, there was love; and it was the all-potent factor in the lives of the men and women of Swanzey, as it has ever been everywhere. There was love, and there was jealousy; and the heart-burnings were as sore in the little country village as they could be in the most sumptuous palace. And there was nobility of soul under homespun cloth, such as is not often found under the finest product of the foreign loom.

And was Swanzey to be an exception to the rule, and were there no girlish hearts there to be racked by selfish men? Alas, no! Fate there, as elsewhere, puts up the tender, unselfish hearts of women to be bowled down by the careless, the unfeeling, or the utterly selfish man. But in Swanzey, too, there came that time when all things were righted, and those who had suffered found peace, while a new generation grew up to take its share in the woes and joys of life.

The story embodies all that the play tells, and all that it

suggests, as well. The publishers have been at a large expense in obtaining the story, but will count that as nothing if they shall succeed, as they believe they will, in presenting to their readers a story which, for pure human interest, exceeds anything which has been given to the public since the days of "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

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DENMAN THOMPSON'S OLD HOMESTEAD.

CHAPTER I.

A RUSTIC WOOING.

It was late in the afternoon of a warm July day, but the glowing sun, still at a white heat, was sufficiently high in the heavens to make the shaded side of the dusty New Hampshire road very grateful to the traveler by foot; even though that traveler, as in the present instance, carried her own protection against the sun's rays in the guise of a hat with brim so broad that it drooped with languid curves about the sweet, rosy face of its owner.

The hat was not set back jauntily on the head with an eye to effect, but was demurely settled on the top of the head, as if to discourage any of the longings of vanity; but, bless her heart! no innocent device of that sort could hide the fact that she was pretty, and winsome, and a delight to look upon. Nor could the plain gown of light-colored calico disguise the fact that she was lissom and free, with the grace of youth and robust good health.

The hands—one of which carried a bunch of recently plucked wild-flowers, and the other swung freely at her side—were a trifle red, as hands will be that honestly wash dishes and make butter, but were dimpled and shapely; and the feet, which could be seen below the decently short skirt, were shod in stout walking shoes.

But the people who looked upon pretty Ruth Stratton for the first time, were very likely to lose sight of details in the general effect, and the general effect was—a pure delight.

It was quite possible to look upon her and make a grave mistake. There was a coquettishness about the chestnut curls that would escape bondage and fringe her broad, low forehead, and archness in the very demureness of her brown eyes that might incline any one to the opinion that she was of a frivolous mind; but no greater injustice could be done her, for she was a very child in simplicity of thought and directness of expression, and abhorred coquetry. She was of a gay humor, however, and there was ever a smile lurking in the glance of her eye, or dancing on the curve of her red lip, and that is why those who did not know her better would suspect her of light-mindedness, when in fact it was only light-heartedness she was guilty of.

She was not walking rapidly this afternoon, nor did she loiter, precisely. She walked along slowly in a preoccupied way, for the most part keeping her eyes on the ground and occasionally raising her head and glancing with furtive shyness along the road in front of her, as if expecting to see some one, and yet not willing to seem to be looking. This unwillingness was for her own sake, however, for she was not aware of any witnesses.

A pair of keen eyes had, nevertheless, been watching her for more than five minutes. When she was far up the road, and all that could be seen of her was an indistinct outline of white, these bright blue eyes had been turned indifferently that way. They had seen the white outline, scrutinized it curiously, turned away carelessly, and then suddenly back again, this time with a joyous eagerness.

A strong, sun-browned hand shaded the blue eyes, and, for a few seconds, hope and fear alternated in animating the face in which the eyes were set. Only for a few seconds, however, for then the calm of satisfied hope settled on all

the features, and, with a soft, lingering ejaculation of "Ruth Stratton," as if there was a pleasure in the saying as well as in the thinking, the man, to whom the eyes, hand, and various other features belonged, strode with a long, plow-learned step to a big, black-cherry tree and waited under its shade, with arms resting on a rail that ran above the stone wall, and head inclined so that he could easily watch the approach of the young girl.

He was on the opposite side of the road from her, and in a hay field, which fact, together with his being in the shade, may account for her not seeing him; but her preoccupation was more at fault than any circumstance connected with him, a fact which he seemed to realize, for as she drew nearer, and failed to see him, an amused smile parted his lips, disclosing two rows of strong, white teeth. He waited until she had passed him, and then, with the drawl which the "down-East" countryman affects when humorously inclined, called out gently, for he would not startle her:

"Wa-at ye got agen me, Ruth?"

She turned with a start, flashing a quick glance along the road as she did so, and the color dyed her round cheeks as she said:

"Oh, Ben! I didn't see you. What a start you gave me!"

"Didn't mean to do that. Knew ye didn't see me. Been a-watchin' ye all along as ye kem down the road," and he laughed pleasantly.

She cast another of those shy glances along the road, flushed consciously—thereby giving Ben new cause to look admiringly at her—and then said, confusedly:

"Oh! Got the hay all in?"

"Ya-as; last load just gone in. I was just a-goin' down to th' pastur' to drive up th' caows. I'll go up th' road a piece with ye;" and despite a shade of chagrin which flashed over her face, for he did not see it, he slowly climbed over the wall, resting on the top long enough to ask, "Squire's

hay all in?" and to receive her answer that it was safely housed, and then, taking the ditch in a long stride, crossed over to her.

He took his place by her side, and they walked forward together. Sometimes, where the foot-path was wide enough, he walked close beside her, sometimes he balanced himself on the slope of the bank that raised the path above the road, and sometimes he walked in the road.

For a while neither spoke. She went along with face hidden from him by the brim of her hat, glancing oftener than before along the road and betraying some anxiety on her pretty face; while he, with beaming eyes and serene countenance, seemed to be perfectly happy, simply at being where he was. Evidently the silence was less irksome to him than to her, for she was the first to break it.

"It looks like rain," she said.

He cast his eyes critically along the south and west horizon and nodded his head, though to the inexperienced eye the sky was faultlessly clear.

"Ya-as, it'll rain 'fore dark. Glad th' hay's all in. Never see brighter hay, nor more on it fer this section. Nigh onto two full loads to th' acre. They do say Uncle Josh 'll beat that. Seen Rube lately?"

"He's in Keene, you know," and almost in spite of herself her eyes wandered up the road.

"Ya-as, in th' bank. Doin' well, too, they do say. Where ye goin', if it's any o' my business?"

"For—for a walk up the road," she answered, hesitatingly.

He smiled pleasantly, as if he had no fault to find with that, until an uncomfortable thought obtruded itself, and the smile changed into a frown; and he, too, unwittingly copying her action, glanced along the road. She did not see that, but she remarked a peculiarity in his sudden silence, and, after a few moments, looked up at his face. It was looking down at her with an expression that made her turn

hastily away and utter the first commonplace that came to her.

"We need rain to lay the dust, don't we?"

"Ya-as, we need rain," he answered, mechanically. "Ruth, will ye go to meetin' with me to-morrow?"

She glanced up at him with a faintly scared look, and answered, hesitatingly:

"I—I have promised some one else."

"Rube Whitcomb," he rather asserted than asked.

"Yes," she answered, with a rising color, and just a touch of defiance.

"You went with him last Sunday."

"Well?"

"Will you go with me a week from to-morrow?"

"That's a good ways ahead."

"You didn't mind promising Rube a week ahead."

"You have no right to say such a thing, Ben."

"Seems to me what's fair fer one's fair fer 'nother. If you kin promise him a week ahead——"

"I didn't promise him a week ahead. I—I—don't be unkind, Ben. I suppose I may do as I please, anyhow."

"I don't want to be unkind—not to you—and you know it." He was growing very fervent in his tone, and Ruth squeezed the tender flowers in her hand, and looked beseechingly at him, but he did not see her. He was looking up the road, as if he knew his danger came from there. "But I don't see why Rube Whitcomb—unless you're bound to him——"

"You have no right to say that. It's—it's ungentlemanly."

"Ongentlem'nly!" he repeated, with a sort of scorn of the word. "You mean I don't wear store clothes, like Rube, every day. Look here, Ruth, why can't ye——" He caught an anxious glance as she flashed it up the road, and, with

jealous intuition, interrupted himself to exclaim: "You're not out to meet him now!"

The warm blood flooded her face, and she was about to answer him indignantly, when he interrupted her with pleading humility:

"I didn't mean to say that. It's none o' my business. But, Ruth, you know how it stands with me—now please let me say it. I'm 'fraid I'm too late, but I must say it, Ruth. I've growed up with ye, an' learned to love ye, an'—I s'pose I've been slow—an' I hoped mebbe ye might come to love me——"

"Please don't, Ben. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry!" he repeated, with a short laugh; but his voice vibrated in a way that made Ruth's tender heart ache for him, and caused the sympathetic eyes that were turned up to him to fill with moisture.

"Don't cry for me," he said, hastily. "But is it sure, Ruth? Ain't there no hope fer me at all? No?" as she shook her head pityingly. "Well, 'taint your fault, Ruth. I wa'n't half good 'nough fer ye; but I've had th' comfort o' lovin' ye. That's somethin'. Ye'll ferget th' things I've said as wa'n't nice, won't ye? Of course ye will—trust ye fer that. Well, it's somethin' to love ye, even if I didn't get anythin' back. I must git them caows hum. I'll turn here. Good luck t' you, an' t' him, too, whoever he is."

He waved his hand, tried to smile at her, and was away before she could say a word. She stood and watched him, and presently he turned, saw her still standing there, and waved both hands, as if in benediction of her. Then he turned abruptly, and kept on his way.

Ruth looked after him for a while longer, and then, with a half sigh, turned and resumed her way. She did not go far, however. Her steps faltered first, then stopped, and then she turned half around. It was as if she was regret-

ting her dismissal of Ben, but that was not, in fact, what troubled her.

She felt very sorry for him—more sorry than she had ever felt for anybody—but it was not that which made her anxious



THE OLD HOMESTEAD.

now. The truth was, his words had opened her eyes to the possibilities of her meeting with Reuben Whitcomb; for he had asked her to meet him, and she had gone, with a con-

sciousness of his feelings for her, and of hers for him, but with no such defined idea of the probable end of their relations to each other as Ben had so bluntly suggested.

It was a matter of course that a girl so pretty of face, so gentle of nature, and so joyous of temperament, should count her admirers by the score; but she was still young, and, until now, no one had made her realize that in her was vested the happiness of men. The knowledge was forced upon her by Ben's declaration; and, although she was sure that he was not the choice of her heart, she was not ready to be sure that Reuben Whitcomb was.

In any case the thought of meeting him now, with her new-born consciousness fresh within her, filled her with positive alarm; and, but for seeming to follow Ben, she would, despite her promise to meet Reuben, have turned incontinently about, and gone back home.

She was standing in this hesitating mood, when up over the brow of the hill, up which the road climbed, there appeared first the head and then the body of a man, who, disregarding of the hot weather, was walking briskly. He caught sight of Ruth as quickly as she did of him, and in a twinkling he had snatched his hat off, and was waving it with a gay welcome.

He saw her wave her hand in response, but he was too far away to see how suddenly the red color surged to her face, and retreated again, leaving her with a fluttering heart, while she tremulously murmured:

"Oh, here he is now! What shall I do?"

Of course there was but one thing to do, and she did it. She walked demurely to meet him, exercising all the natural self-control of her sex as she went, so that when they met he saw only that she was a trifle more shy, even, than usual, and that his warm greeting was received with what seemed remarkably like coolness.

"How kind of you, Ruth, to come to meet me!" he gratefully exclaimed.

"Did you walk over from Keene?" she asked.

There was a rebuff in the tone, and he looked at her with a quick, frank surprise; for, if she had been unaware of the state of *her* heart, it was not so with him, and he had even gone so far as to hope that he was as much to her as she was to him.

"No," he answered, gravely; "I got out of the buggy at the foot of the hill, and walked up. Walter Porter drove me over, and I told him to turn back there.

"Are you tired?"

"Oh, no."

"Is anything the matter?"

"No. Why?"

He looked at her wonderingly. She was not at all like herself. In truth, she was surprised at herself for her coolness to him. She had not intended to hurt his feelings, but she was so afraid of what he might say, that she had tried to hold him in check by the only method she could think of—reserve.

"You do not seem quite natural, somehow," he said, in answer to her query.

"Oh!" And she relapsed into silence.

He, being at a loss how to contend with this unexpected phase of her character, also maintained silence, and the two walked forward together. The situation was so like the one which preceded Ben's unexpected declaration, that Ruth began to grow nervous. She sought about for something to say, and it seemed to her there never had been such a dearth of suitable subjects. But she must say something, or he would.

"I just met Ben Eastman," she said.

She knew the moment she had said it that nothing could have been worse, for with the new consciousness came new

intuitions, and she felt that Reuben would see a rival in Ben, just as Ben had seen one in him. And she could see now that of all her admirers these two had been the most persistent. These two were the lovers. She flushed at the thought, and Reuben saw the flush and put his own construction on it.

"Perhaps you would like to walk with Ben Eastman?" he said.

She wondered if it always made a man say unpleasant things to be in love; but somehow it did not disturb her as much to have Reuben angry as it had to have Ben seem so.

"He did walk with me for a little way."

"Perhaps my coming interfered with a longer walk."

"Perhaps it did."

This was true enough, but she repented as soon as she had said it, for she could see by his face, which by the way she was not looking at, that she had given his heart a severe wrench. He turned pale and answered very humbly:

"I am sorry I came then."

"Why, Rube," she cried, melting at once, "how foolish you are! If I had not wanted to come I wouldn't have come, would I?"

"I don't know."

"Why, Rube, you do know. I wouldn't take the trouble to walk away out here to meet you, if I had rather walk with Ben."

"You met Ben on the way."

"I may meet Ben, mayn't I, if I wish to?"

"Yes, of course," answered Reuben, gloomily.

"Now, Rube," said Ruth, with a gentle deprecation that quite disarmed him, "how can you be so unreasonable? I met Ben by pure accident."

"Did you?" and his face lighted up instantly, only to fall

again. "But something has happened. You are not like yourself."

"Who am I like?"

He looked up quickly, and as his eye met hers the troubled, anxious expression left his face and gave way to a smile; for on her face, by some miraculous means, there had come the old merry frankness which there was no resisting.

"Now you are like yourself and nobody else," he exclaimed. "And Ruth, nothing has happened, has there?"

"Father's got his hay in, and Ben Eastman said they had nearly two loads to the acre."

"You know I don't mean that, Ruth." His hand stole down to her side and gently caught hers. She glanced quickly up and as quickly down again, and both blushed. "I was afraid, Ruth," he went on, lowering his voice and speaking rather unsteadily, "that maybe somebody else had—had—" she looked up in dismay—"had asked you what—what I have been—— Ruth, dear, I love you. Can you love me? Oh, please," he cried in a frightened tone, "don't take your hand away. Mayn't I hold it? Oh, thank you. And you do love me, don't you, Ruth?"

The sweetest face in Swanzev was turned blushing up to him for one shy, blissful moment, and then was turned away again. Ruth Stratton was quite sure of her heart, now.

CHAPTER II.

A VISIT FROM THE SHERIFF.

The clouds which had lain undeveloped on the horizon, imperceptible to any but a farmer's eye, had lifted rapidly and were now threatening, but they were in the west and the faces of the lovers were turned eastward, so that there were no clouds in existence for them, and both were sur-

prised, on reaching the Whitcomb farm, to see the hurry about the place.

The usually placid oxen had been goaded into a brisk walk, and were hauling a great load of hay up the slope to the barn; the men for once had quickened their regulation pace, and the master was giving his peremptory orders in the voice of a man who was kind so often that he could venture to be sharp occasionally.

"Naow, boys, git up inter that maow—gee, haw! Them critters lose their heads th' minit you drive 'em up—ther's another load t' git in yet, and a shower a-comin'. Gee, ther, gee, durn yer skin! Haw, haw!" and with a final tug the great beasts drew the heavy load into the barn, the wheels grinding on the hollow floor with a noise like distant thunder.

Ruth and Reuben stood unobserved spectators of the scene until the load disappeared through the doors; then the old man turned and saw them, and a bright, genial smile broke over his hearty, sunbrowned face.

"Rube, boy, how be ye? Ruth Stratton, glad t' see ye. Jest in th' nick o' time, Rube; a shower a-comin' an' me short-handed. Be ye too tired?"

Reuben looked ruefully at Ruth, but answered, manfully:

"Oh, no, I'll just get my coat off first. Want me in the mow or in the field? I won't be a minute. You'll stay to supper, Ruth?" he whispered.

Ruth nodded, and the old man responded:

"I ain't tetched that piece o' medder yet with a rake. Best I got an' only a small patch on it too. Nigh onto a full load, t' that place. Eb. Ganzey's out thar and plenty o' rakes. I want t' git it in t'night. Be right out myself. You go in an' see Aunt Tildy, Ruth. Squire's hay all in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wa-al you go on in. Like's not she's in th' kitchen. You kin find her anyhow. All right down t' Keene, Rube?"

and without waiting to hear Reuben's answer the old man bustled into the barn.

Reuben exchanged what may be called an ecstatic glance of disappointment with Ruth, and together they went into the house, he to go up stairs to pull on a pair of overalls and she to seek Aunt Matilda in the kitchen. The good lady was there, and Ruth made her presence known by standing in the door-way and asking:

"Can't I help you, Aunt Tilda?"

"Sakes!" exclaimed the startled spinster, turning from the bowl in which she was stirring a dark-brown mixture. "Oh, Ruth Stratton, is that yeou? Real glad to see yeou! Set right deown an make yourself to hum. How's th' squire?"

"He's well, but I am going to stay to supper, and I want to do something. Going to fry those potatoes?"

"Ye-es, but you got yeour good gown on."

"Lend me an apron, then."

"Wa-al, ef yeou will do 't, take that there one hangin' behind the door. Am a leetle mite short o' help, fer Joshua can't spare any o' th' men for the milkin' an'—take that spider there, an' some o' the fat out o' the fried pork."

"Do you slice 'em, or cut 'em in quarters, Aunt Tilda?"

"Don't make no difference. Plenty an' well browned, an' nobody'll say a word. Didn't I hear Reuben come in?"

"Yes, he went up stairs to take off his coat. He's going f'out to the field to rake up the meadow piece."

"Sakes alives! What for?"

"Uncle Josh wanted him to."

"Joshua oughtn't a done that. The boy must be tired; but he'd work his hands off fer his father."

"Uncle Josh would do anything for him."

"So he would. Thinks the world o' Rube. Good right to, too. Ain't a better boy in Cheshire County. You kem with him, did ye?"

Ruth cut the potatoes very assiduously, and answered, faintly:

"Yes, ma'am."

"Kem 'round by your place, did he?"

"No-o; I met him."

"Sho! did ye? Where?"

Ruth blushed up to her very eyes, but could think of no way of evading the question, so answered it as boldly as she could:

"On the Keene road, by Eames'."

Aunt Tilda turned her head slowly, and glanced over her spectacles at Ruth, who never was so intent on anything as she was on the cutting of those potatoes. The keen old eyes needed no spectacles to tell them that Ruth was rather more crimson than even the best of health demanded, and after a moment of silent inspection, Aunt Tilda turned to her cake-batter again and stirred in a vigorous—

"Umph!"

Ruth looked over at the old lady for a moment in a hesitating way, and then, with a new flood of blushes, said, softly:

"Aunt Tilda!"

"Wa-al?"

"I'd like to tell you something, if you won't tell anybody else."

"Sho! Would ye? Wa-al, I reckon I can keep it. What is it?"

And the gray eyes looked over the glistening glasses with keen curiosity and pleased expectation.

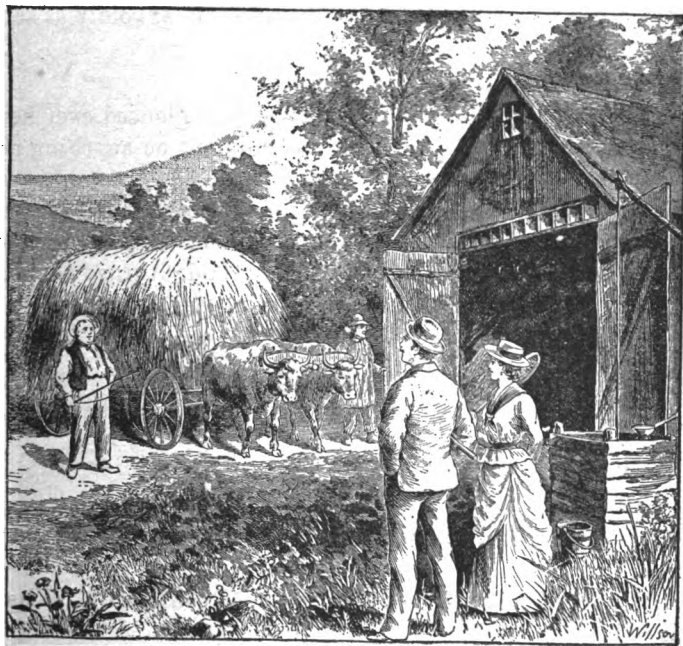
"Why—er—Reuben has proposed to me!"

"I want t' know! Wa-al, I'm real glad, that I be. Spoke to-day, did he? Wa-al, I don't know as I be so very much s'rprised. Counted on it, I might say."

And the elderly spinster, with the warmth of earnest ap-

proval, went over to Ruth and gave her a congratulatory kiss.

Reuben, in the meantime, had lost no time in getting out to the hay-field. He knew the importance of getting the hay in, and worked blithely to the tune of his own happy thoughts.



THE LAST LOAD OF HAY.

The clouds swung around to the south and grew blacker and blacker every moment; but he knew there was still some time before the storm would reach them; and, urging the slow Ganzey boy to increased exertions, he had the satisfaction of keeping well ahead of the wagon, when it came out again to load up.

All hands worked hard and with the result of seeing the last forkful tossed on the heavily laden wagon, and the wagon well on its way to the barn, before the first warning drops fell.

"Leave it right in th' barn," called out the old man. "We'll onload Monday mornin'. Now, then, Rube, boy, how be ye?"

And he drew near to his son with a look of affection which a stranger, witnessing his first hasty greeting, would have been surprised at.

But Reuben was the old man's only son and the very apple of his eye, and all his thoughts of the future, all his actions in the present, were with a direct bearing on the boy's welfare. And it was pleasant for the old man to reflect that Reuben had always been a good boy—mischievous, of course, as any healthy boy should be, but never anything unmanly. He was very proud of his boy, and it was no little gratification to him that Reuben had been found worthy of a place of trust in the Cheshire Bank of Keene.

"Gettin' t' look quite cityfied, ain't ye, Rube—eh?"

"Well, you see I have to, father, being in the bank."

"Ya-as, ya-as, to be sure; only jest spoke on it, Rube, t' notice it."

"Er—father, I met Ruth on the road, as I was coming along——"

"Ya-as, I see she was with ye. Nice gal. All them Stratton gals is nice."

"I knew you thought so, father, and that——"

"Eh?"

And the old man whirled around suddenly and looked at Reuben, with a twinkle in his kindly blue eyes.

Reuben turned red and pulled out his handkerchief, and did various other things to show his freedom from embarrassment, with the usual result of making it more apparent. Meanwhile the twinkle in the old man's eye developed and

affected the whole of his face, so that presently he was all of a broad, hilarious smile, and he thrust his thumb into Reuben's side and cried out:

"Ye've been an' done it, hev ye, ye rascal? Hi, gun! I knowed ye would. See it a-comin' an' knowed th' symptoms! I'm glad—I'm real glad, Rube. Ain't a better gal 'n Ruth Stratton in—hi, gun! I don't bleeve ther's a better anywhere! What's the squire say?"

"I only just spoke to her. I'm going over after supper to tell him."

"That's right, that's right."

"You won't speak of it until I have told him, will you, father?"

"Not a word. He's a leetle mite tetchy, an' mightn't like it. I won't say a word 'cept to Aunt Tildy."

As soon as they reached the house, the old man made his way into the kitchen, followed by Reuben, and called out:

"Heard the news, Tildy?"

"Ya-as. Why, Joshua, how you act!" for the old man had taken Ruth in his arms and bestowed a kiss upon her blushing face."

"Wa-al, I calc'late she kin spare one," said the delighted Joshua.

Certainly no one could blame the old man for kissing Ruth, for she was a most tempting object as she stood in the middle of the kitchen, her sleeves rolled up and showing her round, white arms, a housewifely gingham apron over her gown, and a face, above all, dimpled with happiness and confusion. Reuben would have been glad to have had the courage to follow the example of his father, as the old man hilariously suggested.

It was well that the farm hands were too hungry to think of anything but their food, for if they had not been, they surely would have suspected the secret, for Uncle Josh was too happy to contain himself, and gave vent to his feel-

ings in joking allusions which he considered delicately calculated to deceive any but the interested persons; but which kept them in constant apprehension.

Fortunately, the old gentleman's thoughts were somewhat diverted by the appearance of a visitor in the person of Cyrus Prime, who was always interesting, by reason of his two peculiarities—one of which was his inability to tell the exact truth, and the other was his pretensions to the hand of Aunt Tilda. He had been a suitor for that spinster's affections ever since he had been of "courtin' age," but never yet had mustered up the courage to reveal his feelings to her who was most concerned.

"Cyrus, how be ye?" was her quiet salutation.

"Sit down, Cy—take a cheer," said Uncle Josh. "Been a hot day."

"Hot! How be yeou, Reuben! How be yeou, Ruth Stratton! I see ye got yeour last load in, Joshua. Just met Ben Eastman on his way to Keene——" Ruth and Reuben exchanged conscious, but very loving glances. "Got all o' their'n in, an' he says there ain't been sich a yield for ten year. Nigh unto two load to th' acre. But I remember, 'bout twenty year ago, timothy grew so allfired rank and big that Seth Perkins——" Seth was Cy's most formidable rival—"got lost in his own two-acre lot—he, he, he! He'd deny it ef he was here; but ef old Bill Jones was alive I could prove it."

What other stories Cyrus would have been led to tell may not be known, for at this moment another and far more important visitor arrived. This was Sam Foster, a hearty, bluff, red-faced man, with an air of authority that sat well on his good-natured face, as if saying, "I am obliged to do my duty, but I will do it with as little harshness as possible."

Sam Foster was the most popular man in Cheshire County, and that is why he was elected sheriff, no doubt.

He was hailed at once by Joshua as soon as he was discovered through the open window.

"Come right in, sheriff. Had supper? We ain't more'n jest through. Tildy'll get ye suthin' warm. Sit down. Kind o' outen yer way, eh? Don't want me for house-breakin' do yer?"

And the old man laughed in his jolly way.

The sheriff, however, seemed to find it difficult to respond to the jovial greeting in kind, and looked very much disturbed indeed.

"Don't want any supper, Uncle Josh?" he said, casting a singularly uneasy glance around the room, and finally resting his eyes on Reuben, who was quietly whispering to Ruth.

"Sho, nonsense!" ejaculated Joshua. "Get him suthin'; Tildy; an', Reuben, go out with Eb. Ganzey an' take the sheriff's horse out an feed him."

Reuben started forward with polite alacrity, but the sheriff barred his way with a peculiar gesture, and said:

"No, Uncle Josh, I haven't the time. Fact is, I've a mighty disagreeable piece of business on hand, and I'd give all I'm worth if I didn't have it to do."

There was a general look of consternation exchanged by those in the room, and Uncle Josh, with a pained expression, said:

"Wa-al, sheriff, ef any o' my men's been a-doin' anythin' wron', they must 'a been mighty sly about it. Howsomer, duty's duty, an' ef it's disagreeable 'tain't your fault. What's up?"

"Why, Uncle Josh, sooner than——"

"Out with it, Sam. Quickest work's kindest work."

The sheriff turned away from the good old man and spoke rapidly, as if he would have it over as speedily as might be.

"Well, it's got to be done. I'm after Rube."

Every startled eye turned on the young man. He blanched, but looked as much surprised as any of them.

"Rube! my Rube!" repeated the old man, as if he could not believe his ears. "I—I s'pose it's a joke, Sam; but 'tain't the kind o' joke I like."

"I wish it was a joke, Uncle Josh," and there was something in his manner that convinced everybody that something very serious was the matter. "Come, Rube, you'll have to go with me."

"What for? What have I done?"

"Come, Rube, it ain't right by the old man," said the sheriff, in a low tone, intended for the young man's ears alone.

"Don't you fret fer th' old man, Sam Foster," broke in Uncle Josh, with a certain nobility of gesture which was natural to him in his serious moments. "What's my boy done? I don't bleeve he's done anythin' I'd hev t' be 'shamed t' hear."

"He's charged with robbing the Cheshire Bank of ten thousand dollars, and I hold a warrant for his arrest."

And the sheriff, with determination and grief at once written on his face, stepped forward and placed his hand on Reuben's shoulder.

There was something so suggestive of criminality in the gesture that the old man cringed, as if the very fact of being so touched contaminated even the innocent. He staggered and clutched at a chair to support him.

Reuben, too, shrank away, and cast a wild look from his father to Ruth, as if trying to guess what they must think of him, but he said nothing.

Cy Prime had listened with open mouth to the accusation, and for a moment seemed bereft of the power to move, but he was a man of imagination, and in the emergency had a plan. He stole around to Reuben's side, and whispered into his ear:

"I'll trip him up, Rube; then you run."

And no doubt he would have tried, at least, to put his plan into execution had not Joshua suddenly straightened up and exclaimed, huskily:

"I don't b'leeve a word on't, Rube; but I want ye t' say yer innocent."

"As innocent as you, father!"

"Thar, I knowed it! Sheriff, take yer hand off'n that boy. I won't stan' it! Goldarned ye! T' come here an' put yer hand on him like thet! Let go on him; I tell ye, let go!"

And the irate old man caught up a chair as if he would break it over the head of the man who had dared to insult his son.

The sheriff, instead of getting angry, only lifted his hand in sorrowful deprecation and said, gently:

"You can't fight against the law, Uncle Josh. I'm awful sorry, but there ain't no help for it. The law's too strong, and the warrant's regular."

"Great Heaven, he's right!" wailed the old man, and he dropped, white and sobbing, into a chair.

"Come, Rube," whispered the sheriff, with a glance of pity at the broken old man, "for his sake, come quick!"

Reuben turned with a look of shame and agony at Ruth, and, with bowed head, left the house by the side of the sheriff.

CHAPTER III.

A MESSENGER FROM KEENE.

It was a cruel moment to the old man when he realized that his boy had actually been taken from him as a criminal, and he sat like one stupefied until he was roused by Ruth's frantic, agonized cry:

"Oh, Uncle Josh, he is taking Rube away! Don't let him, don't let him!"

"I can't help it, I can't help it," wailed the stricken old man, but the thought seemed to inspire him with a new energy, and he sprang up from his chair and ran after them.

"Hold on a minute, sheriff," he cried; "there can't be sich a dreadful hurry. Let's talk it over quiet an' calm. I was foolish a minit ago, an' I'm sorry for't. Ain't ther nuthin' kin be done? Think on it, Sam. No bail, nor nuthin' o' thet sort? Don't take him away like thet, Sam. You'll break my old heart—but thet's nuthin'. You'll break his'n, an' like's not ruin his young life. An innercent boy, Sam—think o' thet! Fer I tell ye he is innercent. I ain't brought him up not to know it. Can't we fix the bail somehow, Sam?"

Brave, sturdy old Joshua! With such a pang at his old heart as he had never before felt in all his life, he was striving to be calm and dispassionate, so that the sheriff might have no excuse for hurrying his boy away; but he could not hide the tremor in his voice, nor keep back the tears that dimmed his honest blue eyes.

Reuben, who had not dared to trust himself to speak, looked up as he heard his father pleading with the sheriff, and listened to his words with a haggard, shamed face. And it seemed to Ruth that she could see in his eyes a sense of loneliness and despair, and, moreover, he seemed to purposely avoid looking at her. Her tender woman's heart went out to him with a great rush of pity, and regardless of who might see, she ran to his side and slipped her hand into his.

He cast a swift, grateful glance down into her upturned eyes, and she knew she had done the one thing to give him courage. That was enough. She cared nothing, after that, what anybody might think or say. She was comforting the man she loved, and she stood bravely by his side giving his

hand that gentle pressure which told him that her faith in him was absolute.

"Uncle Josh," said the sheriff, sympathetically, "you'd know any other time that I have nothing to do with the bail—not any more than you have."

"Thet's so, Sam, thet's so; but ain't ther nuthin' kin be done? Think o' th' boy, Sam!"

"Uncle Josh, there's no help for it; I must arrest Rube and take him to Keene. If there was any way out of it I'd find it without the asking. Come, Rube, it's only making it harder every minute we stay."

The old man staggered and put his hand tremblingly to his head, muttering:

"Take him t' Keene! An' everybody'll see him an' know he's 'rested."

"Sam Foster," suddenly broke out Aunt Tilda, who was vigorously rubbing her glasses, as if the fault was in them instead of in the tears that flooded her eyes and rolled down her cheeks unheeded; "Sam Foster, I knowed ye as a baby, an' I wouldn't a b'lieved then that you'd ever a done a thing like this t' our Rube."

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly, and touching Rube on the arm led him away. Joshua stretched out his hand appealingly.

"Wait'll I hook up, Sam. I'll go in with ye. Couldn't ye let Rube ride with me, Sam?" he pleaded. "I give ye my word, an' I wouldn't break it to save Rube's life, thet I won't let him go ef he wants to."

It seemed as if the sheriff was going to find it compatible with his duty to accede to this request, and the old man watched him eagerly, studying the play of every muscle of his face; but, before he could make a reply, there came a sudden clatter of hoofs and rattle of wheels down the road and everybody turned, for there was a meaning in the haste

of the approach, and instinctively all thoughts connected it with the matter in hand.

In another second a great, strong-limbed bay dashed into view, whirling a road wagon behind him, and stopped short by the side of the sheriff's wagon. Perhaps Ruth was the first to recognize the horse and then the driver, and Rube caught her low cry of "Ben Eastman!" And it seemed to him, with a little pang of jealousy, even at that moment, that there was hope in her tone.

It was Ben Eastman, but he did not jump out of his wagon with the hurry that might have been expected, considering the character of his approach. He threw the reins around the whip and leaned forward as if to jump, and then, seeing the group, drew leisurely up again and said, slowly.

"Hold on, Sam!"

Then, as if to make up for his previous haste, he carefully climbed out of his wagon, reached under the seat for the tiestrap and went around to the horse's head to tie him. In the meantime, half a dozen persons crowded around him to discover what the nature of his news was. But he tied his horse and made his way to where the sheriff and those most nearly interested stood.

"Well," demanded the sheriff, "what is it?"

"Ye got some good news, Ben," cried the old man steady-ing himself against the well guard.

"Is it anything about Rube, Ben?" asked Ruth.

She spoke more softly than either of the others, but she was the only one he heard—and Reuben noted that, too—and he turned to her with a pleasant smile.

"Ya-as, it's about Rube. He didn't take th' money no more'n I did. They've got the feller thet did take it, an' all the money; so ye can let Rube go, sheriff."

Uncle Josh listened hungrily to every word Ben spoke,

and when he had finished started forward, exclaiming peremptorily:

"Take yer hand off'n him, sheriff—take it off. Rube, boy, I knowed ther was some mistake," and he held his hands out toward his son.

Reuben held out his disengaged hand and the old man grasped it, and so between the young love and the old he turned and listened to what the sheriff was saying to Ben.

"Where did you hear thi:?"

"In Keene. I had to drive over, an' when I got ther the place was jest a hummin' with th' news thet Rube Whitcomb had stolen some money out er th' bank, an' was a-goin' t' be 'rested. Now I'd knowed Rube too long to b'leeve any such thing as thet, an' I went t' your office at th' court-house t' find out. Sure 'nough, you'd gone after him, an' I didn't know what t' do better'n stay right ther an' wait fer ye, Rube"—he turned to Rube, and Rube nodded his head—"fer I thought mebbe you'd want some un besides Uncle Josh t' go bail fer ye——"

"Thet was neighborly, Ben Eastman—real neighborly," broke in Uncle Josh, gratefully.

Ben nodded as if he took no great credit to himself for what he had proposed to do, but if he was careless of the old man's praise, he was not so of the grateful look flashed at him out of Ruth's brown eyes. He flushed at that, and turned quickly to the sheriff.

"I didn't hev t' wait fer ye, sheriff, fer I hadn't more'n turned 'round to set down when dep'ty Bill Sanders kem in with the word thet the real robber was caught an' in th' jail. An' what was more, he had confessed th' hull truth, an' Rube hed no more t' do with it 'an I had. I didn't believe it then any more'n I do now, Rube, an' I said so right out. But I'm real glad yer cleared, an' ther's my hand on't."

He put his hand out to Reuben, but gave his eyes to

Ruth, as if soliciting another smile from her, and she gave it to him readily, and more. She held out her own little hand and said, softly:

"You can't know how grateful I am, Ben. I know how generous and good it was of you to do it."

Ben turned scarlet, dropped the little hand, whose confiding pressure made his heart beat wildly, and turned again to the sheriff, who was saying with a puzzled expression:

"You know I believe every word you say, Ben, but I don't just see my way clear. If you'd only thought, now, to bring some sort o' word."

"Some sort o' word? Oh, of course." He felt in his various pockets with anxious care and at length brought forth a slip of paper on which was some writing. "Ther it is, but no thanks to my head fer it. I was fer going off after ye in a minit, but Bill says, 'take this here t' Sam, an' he'll know it's all right.' An' I'll bet all my old boots ther hes never been no better time 'tween this an' Keene than I made. I was so mortal 'fraid I'd be too late an' not ketch ye till ye'd took Rube away, thet I jest laid on the whip all th' horse 'ud bear. He's Ethan Allen stock he is. Such bone an' muscle! An' wind! He ain't so all-fired broad in the chest, but jest come here an' take a look at thet depth. He's got a dreadful long reach, too, an' I never see a horse with such a recover;" and, talking all the while, he led the sheriff away from where Rube stood between his father and Ruth.

"Let's go into the house, father," said Reuben, dejectedly moving that way.

"Yes, Rube, yes," said the old man, hesitatingly, "in a minit. Ruth, you go with him. I want t' have a word with Ben Eastman fer what he has done."

"It was good of him, wasn't it?" said Ruth, warmly, as she followed Reuben.

He turned quickly as she spoke, and with a dash of bitterness in his tone, said:

"Perhaps you would rather go thank him, too?"

There might have been a slight flash of resentment in her brown eyes, but if so, it faded into a pitying glance at once, and she answered him, gently:

"I would rather go with you, Rube, than anywhere else."

Even his fierce, new-born jealousy could not resist her winning tenderness, and he broke out, hastily:

"Please forgive me, dear. It was mean to say that."

"Hush, Rube! You may say anything you please. After what you have gone through, who could wonder? I was grateful to Ben, but I wouldn't like you to think there could be anywhere I'd rather be than with you, dear."

She spoke softly, and she was surprised at herself that she could speak so endearingly to Rube, who but a few hours before was only as any other man to her. But there was no embarrassment in doing so. It seemed as if his troubles had made it only natural for her to show him the whole depth of her true woman's heart. Nor was it strange to him. Since the blissful moment when she had looked up into his eyes and confessed her love, he had experienced emotions which had separated that moment from the present by a gulf wider than time. He had been touched by the hand of the law and accused as a criminal, and the humiliation of real crime was as nothing to his sense of degradation during the brief period when he stood before them all, with the fingers of the sheriff actually pressing into his flesh.

But in his relations to Ruth there was something even more potent to make old his love. He had felt the pangs of jealousy. He had seen Ben Eastman's eyes searching the depths of Ruth's, and he had seen the flush of joy on his face when Ruth had smiled at him. He had caught the covert meaning in Ruth's words to him, and he sus-

pected a secret understanding. He told himself that the very service Ben had rendered him had been really rendered to Ruth.

But his jealousy was not yet strong enough to cause him to doubt Ruth. And it surely would need to be a mad passion, indeed, to bring him to that, for there was truth and honest love in every glance and breath of the sweet creature. Besides, for the present, at least, he had her there by his side, infolding him about with her caressing love and sympathy, and Ben was out in the road, giving more of the details of his disgrace—he could not get that view of it out of his mind—and telling how the robbery was actually committed.

They could hear the voices and could catch a suggestive word now and again; and Ruth, with womanly tact, perceiving how keenly he felt what had occurred, tried to drown the sound of their voices by her own, and for lack of a better subject to talk of, she told him of how she had gradually learned to love him. It is a story all men like to hear, and Reuben was soon beguiled into forgetting the rougher voices outside until they had died away, and that soft darkness fell upon them, which all lovers like, be they lovers of but one soft hour or of half a century of shared hardship; for there be lovers of the latter sort, and more of them than those who are not such can believe.

And so they sat, whispering those things which are sweet to hear at such times and full of the savor of the love that can never be expressed but when friendly misfortune comes to permit it. But the words that are sweetest to hear are empty to repeat, and we may let them die in the grateful darkness where they were born.

How long they sat so was many minutes melted into hours, but how long they might have sat there may not be computed, for they were interrupted by the coming of Joshua, who heralded his approach by a series of hems and

coughs, which could only mean that he wished to attract attention to the fact that he was about to disturb them.

"I can't see either on ye!" he exclaimed, in that tone of unctuous humor which indicated that he was in his accustomed serene mood. "Didn't light th' lamp fer fear o' 'tractin' skeeters, I s'pose—eh, Rube? Don't move on my 'count," and the old man laughed, as those will laugh who



"DIDN'T LIGHT TH' LAMP FER FEAR O' 'TRACTIN' SKEETERS,
I S'POSE—EH, RUBE?"

have long gone, happy memories evoked in witnessing the happiness of others.

The sound of his father's voice brought Reuben back to his troubles. He moved a little away from the blushing Ruth—the blushes were there even if they could not be seen—though he still held her hand in his.

"Has—has——" he began, when the father took the words out of his mouth, as the saying is, and interjected:

"Has Sam gone? Wa-al, I rather think he has," and he chuckled to think how time had sped with them. "Why, it's nine o'clock!"

"Nine o'clock!" cried Ruth, in dismay. "Oh, what will papa say?"

She started up in a great hurry; but Uncle Josh, who had come near enough to see them in the faint moonlight, said, laughingly:

"Ther', ther', don't be skeered. Th' squire knows where ye are, an' it's all right. I've been over and hed a talk with him."

"Have you been over there to-night? How good you are, Uncle Josh!" she cried, gratefully, for in the midst of her happiness there had now and then arisen the thought of what her father would say.

"'Twan't me, 'twan't me! I wouldn't a thought on it; only Ben Eastman"—Ruth felt Reuben's hand tighten around hers convulsively—"he su'gested it. He said th' squire was kind o' peppery, an' might a heard 'bout Rube an' the sheriff, an' that mebbe we'd better go over an' explain afore he heard any more wrong stories. He seemed t' know all about ye, an'"—again Ruth felt the convulsive tightening of Reuben's hand—"an' so we went over. Ben did th' talkin'; never knew that boy could talk so slick. Couldn't a said more nice things 'bout ye m'self, Rube. He didn't say a word 'bout you two; on'y jest 'bout Rube an' th' mistake thet hed been made. Then, th' squire ripped out a——" The old man suddenly recollected he was talking to the squire's daughter, and changed quickly to, "I mean he sed, in his quiet kind o' way, thet Sam Foster ought a been kicked off'n th' place fer a suspectin' of Rube. Ye know he voted agen Sam. But I stood up fer Sam, fer he was only a-doin' his duty, an' thet's th' kind we want. An' then I thought 'twas a good time t' speak my piece, an' so I up an' sed it, an' th' squire'll give

ye both his blessin'; but I hope he'll be alone when he does it," he muttered to himself with a chuckle, as he recalled the manner in which the squire had not blessed his political opponent, Sam Foster.

CHAPTER IV.

"SHE SHALL NOT HAVE HIM!"

As old Joshua had told the lovers, Ben Eastman had gone with him to Squire Stratton's. Ben had realized, as soon as he had seen Ruth clinging to Reuben's arm, that the latter was the favored man, and he had felt a sort of bitterness toward him for it; but his was not a nature to harbor such a feeling, and he determined not only to rid himself of it, but as a penance for yielding to it he went with Uncle Josh to see the squire, and when there, acquitted himself nobly as the warm advocate of his successful rival.

But while it was comparatively easy to eject the bitterness from his heart, or to strive to advance the cause of his rival, it was impossible for him to reconcile himself to losing Ruth. He went home, therefore, after taking leave of Joshua at the squire's gate, with a heavy heart.

Though it was dark when he reached home he did not stop at the house for a lantern, but put his horse away and fed him in the darkness. Then he ran the buggy into the wagon-house, and went into the house.

The only occupant of the kitchen, when he entered, was a striking looking young woman, of perhaps eighteen or nineteen years of age. She was striking not only by reason of a pair of flashing black eyes and a rich olive complexion, but still more for a certain imperious poise of the head and carriage of body, which gave her the air, as she moved

about the plain kitchen, of being entirely out of place. She looked at Ben as he came in, and said, shortly, as if by way of greeting:

"Yeon're back soon."

"Ya-as, Sue. Kin ye give me a bite o' somethin'? I ain't tetch'd nuthin' since I left."

"Why not? What's wrong?" she asked, indifferently, as she moved about to get him some food.

He seemed to feel that she would take no interest in the matter, but it would be a relief to him to talk with somebody, and he therefore answered:

"Ye ain't heard nuthin', then?"

"How could I, here?" and she waved her hand slightly, but with infinite scorn of her humble surroundings. "Anything great happened?" and she fixed her black eyes on him with a momentary curiosity.

"I driv' over t' Keene," he began, in his deliberate way; and she resumed her task of setting a place for him, showing by an impatient gesture how his slowness vexed her, "'n when I got ther' I heard that Rube Whitcomb"—she stopped suddenly and looked at him—"hed been 'rested for robbin' th' bank."

"What?" she cried, sharply, expressing not merely incredulity but some anger.

"Oh, he wan't guilty; but they thought he was, an' hed 'rested him. I knowed 'twasn't so, 'n I went 't th' sheriff's office 'n found the right man hed been 'rested, so I got a note from th' dep'ty an' jumped in behin' th' bay an' took th' word t' Swanzey. Got ther' jest in time. Sheriff hedn't took 'im yet."

The black eyes had never left his face while he was talking, but a row of white teeth pressing into the girl's full red lips showed she was having difficulty in repressing some emotion. When Ben had finished speaking she demanded, vehemently:

"Who suspected him? Why did they do it?"

"Th' president, 'n th' directors. They thought they hed reason, I s'pose."

"Fools! They might a' knowed he didn't do it," and with an angry flash of her eyes she turned to her work again.

"Ya-as, I didn't b'leeve et, 'n I said so. I was 'fraid he'd be disgraced by bein' 'rested, so I put it t' th' bay, 'n I guess nobody 'ever made sech time 'tween Keene 'n Swanzey."

"'Twas real good on ye, Ben. Shall I fix up something warm fer ye?"

Ben looked up in surprise, for it was not Sue's custom to waste courtesies on anybody. She felt the glance, and the rich color in her cheeks deepened, but she returned his look impassively, and he answered, gratefully:

"I'd like a cup o' tea, ef 'taint too much trouble."

"No trouble," she answered, shortly. "Go on."

"Oh, ther' ain't no more t' tell,'cept 'bout Rube, maybe," and his voice fell a little.

She turned sharply, scrutinized him a moment, and reading some disturbance in his face, asked, peremptorily:

"What is't 'bout Rube?"

"Wa-al, I guess ther' ain't no harm tellin' it. Like's not it'll be 'bout t'morrer, 'n everybody 'll know et."

"Know what? How slow yeou are, Ben!"

"Yeou're-right ther', Sue; I am slow. Mebbe if I hedn't been et might 'be right now."

She stamped her foot impatiently.

"Will yeou tell me what yeou are talkin' 'bout?"

"Ruth Stratton's goin' t' marry Rube," he said, unsteadily.

She let fall the tea-caddy which she had in her hand, and turned fiercely to Ben.

"Ruth Stratton's what?" she demanded.

"Goin' t' marry Rube Whitcomb."

She glided up to him in a manner peculiar to her, and asked, in a voice which she kept steady only by a great effort:

"How do yeou know thet?"

"Wa-al, Uncle Josh told me so, 'n more'n thet; I heard him ask th' squire t' let Rube hev' Ruth. 'N th' squire sed yes."

-She pressed her hand to her bosom, which was heaving violently, and asked, in the same low tone of repressed feeling:

"And Rube?"

"You mean 'bout his askin' Ruth?"

"Yes."

"I guess thet's right 'nough. He asked her this arternoon."

"How d'yeou know?"

"Oh, I've good reason t' think so. But what's the matter wi' yeou, Sue?"

He looked up for the first time, and caught sight of her face, which was distorted in a strange way.

She started, and smoothed her features by a violent effort. Then she turned away and busied herself at the table, and, with her back toward him, answered:

"I was surprised. Besides," she answered, slowly, "I thought you wanted Ruth."

"So I did, but I couldn't hev' her. Rube was ahead o' me." He tried to say it lightly, but his voice trembled in spite of him.

There was a silence of some minutes, during which Sue walked to and fro, in the work of putting the supper on the table, with a fierce sort of energy. Once, when she had to go into the cellar, she went without a candle, and there, under the cover of the darkness, shook her two clenched fists above her head, and cried, in a hoarse whisper:

"She shall not have him—she shall not!"

And when she went up stairs again, she turned to Ben, with a smile curiously made up of coaxing and contempt.

"And if yeou love her, are yeou going to let him have her without a struggle?"

"What can I do ef she loves him th' best?"

"Loves him best!" she retorted, scornfully. "She wants him because he's a gentleman, an's likely t' be somebody. Loves him!" and she laughed with sarcastic bitterness.

"Yeou don't know her, Sue, or yeou wouldn't say thet," answered Ben, warmly.

"Don't know her? Heven't we grown up together? I know her. But there, ef yeou love her, I won't say a word. But if yeou was half a man, Ben Eastman, yeou wouldn't set daown an' let Rube Whitcomb take her right fr'm under yeour nose."

"She loves him, Sue. I could see thet es plain es day in th' way she stood by him. 'Tain't no use, Sue."

"No use! Yeou're too chicken-hearted by half. Don't give it up jest b'cause she said she'd hev him. Ef I was yeou, I'd hev her, 'r nobody should."

"But what kin I do?"

"Do? Ef yeou'd be guided by me, I'll show you what t' do. Hush! Here comes yeour father." She approached closer to him, and clutching him by the arm, whispered, "Don't be a fool! Act es if yeou was jest es good friends es ever. Give me time t' think. She sha'n't—he sha'n't hev her ef I can help yeou to prevent it."

Ben shook his head sadly, but gave no answer. He was gratified that his cousin should espouse his cause so warmly, for he had never suspected that she cared so much for him, but he could not see things as she did. To him there was no longer any hope.

She said nothing more to him that evening, but sat impatiently watching him as he slowly ate his supper, and at

the same time talked with his father of the events of the afternoon. When he was through, she cleared away the dishes, and then, as if stifled by the heat indoors, went out into the lonely night.

She walked rapidly out into the road, and up it a short distance, muttering to herself as she went. Suddenly she stopped, and, with that same gesture with her clenched hands, cried, hoarsely:

"She have him! She! She shall not--shall not! I swear she shall not!"

CHAPTER V.

REUBEN'S RESOLVE.

It was a relief to Reuben to know that the squire—a somewhat unlikely father for so sweet a girl, being quick of temper and free of tongue, and yet with the same elements of good at the bottom that made Ruth not merely the prettiest but the best girl in Swanzy—it was a relief to Reuben to know that he had been informed of his pretensions to the hand of Ruth, and had received the news kindly.

Before the episode of his arrest, he had not doubted that the squire would accept him unquestioningly, for then Joshua Whitcomb's son had no reason to fear the judgment of anybody. But now, to his morbid fancy, it was different. The disgrace of his arrest was upon him, and it seemed as if it must disqualify him from the standpoint of social fitness, if for no other reason.

He was very glad that he could walk home with Ruth through the quiet moonlight, with no dread of having her taken from him when they reached her home; but it came to him more than once, with an angry sort of wish, that he might have been beholden to some other person than Ben

Eastman for several benefits that had befallen him since his arrest.

He said nothing to her of his feelings, nor did she broach the subject, though she knew as well as if he had told her that he was harboring bitter feelings toward the man who had done him so much kindness; how much kindness Ruth alone could have told him; and she would not do it now, for her keen, womanly instinct told her that the time was not ripe for a discussion of the strongest motive of Ben's actions.

What she knew for true nobility of soul would seem something very different to Reuben, with his singularly distorted way of construing Ben's acts. She knew that Reuben was jealous—needlessly so, of course, for her heart was his with a steadfastness of which he, being a man, could have no comprehension; but he was jealous; and, while she deprecated it, and would have had it different if she could, she had yet a certain subtle sense of pleasure in it, as if it was a measure of his love for her.

They walked along in silence for a time. Not in that delicious silence which so often goes with perfect harmony and complete sympathy; but constrainedly, as they must who think the things which may not be spoken. But they did love each other, newly perhaps, but truly too, and the spell of the soft moonlight, and of the fragrant fields, was soon upon them, and their hearts were opened and their lips said those things which are remembered in their simplicity long after the wise sayings of colder hearts are forgotten.

And the stillness of the night was broken many times by the low rippling laugh which comes of a full measure of happiness. And Ruth looked up into his eye and he looked down into hers, and both thought they had found heaven in all its blessedness.

At the end of the walk—strangely short—Reuben was

able to take his blessing from the squire with much less perturbation than he had thought would be possible; though possibly the character of that blessing had something to do with his acceptance of it. It was less a wish for the happiness of the young couple than an anathema of the sheriff who had been so ill-judged as to think of arresting the man who was some day to be his son-in-law; for, by the time Reuben reached the house, the squire had contrived to make the insult his own by marrying Reuben out of hand, and then, the insult being his, relegating him to the post of future son-in-law.

But if Reuben could lose sight of his troubles when with Ruth, he could not keep them out of his mind when she was absent; and so his walk home alone over the dreary road—he had told Ruth he thought the walk such a delightful one—was filled with dismal thoughts.

And it seemed strange to him, when he reached home, that his father who was waiting up to see him, should think so little of the matter that he could talk and laugh in his usual genial way. He would even have avoided the congratulations of Aunt Tilda if it had been possible.

Then, in the morning, there was the regular hired help to see. He was sure they looked at him curiously. And so they did, but it was because they had heard that he had proposed to Ruth Stratton. But worse than all was the ordeal of going to meeting with Ruth, as he had engaged to do.

The keen eye and loving heart of the father had seen and comprehended the supersensitive condition of Reuben's mind, and he had tried to argue it away, but Reuben clung to the thought of being disgraced, as a man often will cling to his absurdity, or a woman to her love, and all the old man could persuade him to agree to, was to hide his feeling, and as far as possible, act as if the affair had never been.

He went to meeting with Ruth, but he writhed all through it with the consciousness that he was the target for every eye there. He could seem to hear them saying to themselves that there was Rube Whitcomb, sitting with Squire Stratton's Ruth, and wondering how the squire would permit it after he, Reuben, had been arrested by the sheriff.

And Ruth watched him as a mother would a sick child, ready to shield him from every inquisitive glance, and seeking in her pitiful heart for some way to help him withstand the attacks of his own morbid fancy. And as long as she was alone with him she could accomplish it, and, knowing this, hurried away with him after meeting, willing to brave the rude jokes that would be made at their expense as new lovers, for the sake of pleasing him.

She could be, and was, with him the most of that day, but she could not go with him to Keene the next morning, and that was the ordeal he dreaded more than any other. He was of a mind not to go, but his father pointed out to him the folly of not doing so, and he was persuaded.

Joshua went with him, had a plain talk with the president of the bank, who apologized for having suspected Reuben; then the old man returned to Swanzey, satisfied that he had made matters easy for Reuben. And so he had done if Reuben had been content to let them be so, but that was not possible for him.

He knew he was pointed out by the boys in Keene as the one who had been first suspected and arrested, and he occasionally heard the words, as he passed through the street, "ten thousand dollars," "arrested at his father's," and others, showing that he was talked of in connection with the robbery. His morbidity grew, and he became restless and unhappy.

Twice during the week he walked over to Swanzey to see Ruth, and to cast his burdens at her feet. And she always

took them up with a cheerfulness that might have led one to suppose that she enjoyed them, instead of really dreading them, and he would go away comforted, after the fashion of men whose burdens are mighty when they bear them, but nothing when they are shifted to the shoulders of the loving woman.

He did not go to see his father those two times, and when Joshua heard he had been to see Ruth, he only said:

“Wa-al, it's only nat'ral. I'd a done the same thing.”

The week was a hard one for Reuben, and he showed the effects of it in his pale face and heavy eyes. But it did finally come to an end, and he looked forward to his Sunday at home with a feeling of having been granted a reprieve for a day.

Ruth was to meet him, as she had done the previous Saturday; and, as then, he dismissed his conveyance at the foot of the hill. He was somewhat earlier, perhaps, than he usually was, for he had wasted no time in getting away from Keene and so, unless Ruth had come early, he might have to wait.

He climbed the hill leisurely and glanced along the road ahead. For a moment he did not see anything of Ruth, and then he did. He was shading his eyes with his hand, and as he caught sight of her he drew it away with a sudden, angry gesture.

He saw her. She was standing under a tree, swinging her hat by one of its ribbons, and talking with somebody. That somebody was Ben Eastman! He was sure enough of that, though the man's back was turned toward him.

What were they saying? It was something interesting, no doubt, since Ruth did not see him.

He quickened his pace, and when Ruth did look up and see him, she knew that he was angry—the very swing of his arm told her that. She paled a little, perhaps, and she wished Ben anywhere but there at that moment, but she

waved her hat and smiled, and began to talk to Ben to distract his attention from Reuben's manner.

"How do, Rube?" said Ben, heartily, for if he did not admire Reuben as much as he might, he was not going to hurt Ruth by letting it be seen.

"How do?" answered Reuben, shortly. "Good-afternoon, Ruth."

Ben opened his eyes. Ruth had attracted his attention from Rube's manner in approaching, but she could not hide the surliness of the tone. He looked at her with an indignant protest in his eyes, but met such a swiftly appealing glance from her that he only shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Wa-al, I guess I'll be off t' th' pastur'," and strode away, muttering to himself some of the uncomplimentary things he might have said to Reuben if he had not been restrained by that soft appeal in Ruth's eyes.

Reuben watched him walk away, and then turned to Ruth.

"I always seem to come at the wrong time," he said.

"Rube, dear!"

"Well, I don't like Ben Eastman."

"He was very kind to you, Rube."

"I suppose you mean he was kind to you."

"Rube"—there was an inflection in the voice that reminded him of the squire—"it is ungenerous and unjust of you to say such a thing. Ben Eastman did a kinder thing than you know of when he took the trouble he did for you. I was just doing what you should have done—I was thanking him."

"Oh, yes, I might have known I'd be in the wrong. But I didn't suppose you'd turn against me."

"Rube, dear," she cried, all pity and gentleness again, "don't take everything so hard. And Ben was kind to you, dear. And Rube"—she hesitated and blushed a little

—"you don't need to feel unkindly toward Ben. I—I couldn't love him, and—and I have told him so."

"Then he ought to have sense enough to leave you alone. And I don't see why he need to harp so much on the kindness he has done me."

"He has never said a word about it, Rube. I am sure he hasn't. Come, dear, don't think of him any more. I'll see him just as little as I can. I'm sure there is not a thing I wouldn't do to please you. You know that, too, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. I know you love me—more than I deserve, I s'pose."

"Oh, I don't think that, dear; but as much as ever I can, and that is a great deal, Rube."

"Yes, I know," and he took her hand in his—it had been patiently waiting to be taken. "Ruth, I have made up my mind. I can't stand this any longer."

"What, dear?" she demanded, in a startled tone, for his manner told her that he had made some desperate resolve.

"Why, this being pointed at as the man who was arrested, this being talked about all the time. I knew how it would be, and I can't stand it."

"But what will you do, Rube?"

"I'll go away."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere. I won't stay here to be pointed at."

"But where can you go, Rube? What are you thinking of?"

"Others have done well in the city. I don't see why I shouldn't."

"What city?" she asked, faintly. "Boston?"

"No, New York."

CHAPTER VI.

UNCLE JOSHUA'S PROPOSITION.

Ruth caught Reuben by the arm, crying:

"Oh, Rube, are you in earnest?"

"In earnest? Yes. How could you expect me to stay here under the circumstances? Besides, it will be a good thing anyhow. I can make more money in the city, and we can be married sooner, and get away from this—this wretched little place."

"You ought to know best, Rube," she said, sadly.

"I do know best, I am sure, dear," he answered, pleased at once by her admission of his superior judgment, and by her manifest sorrow. "I have been thinking it over all the week."

"You said nothing to me about it," she said, gently.

"I hadn't made up my mind," he replied, somewhat impatiently; "and, besides, I did not care to worry you about it then."

"You haven't spoken to Uncle Josh about it?"

"Of course not. I didn't go to see him either of the times I went to see you, but it doesn't matter anyhow, for I have made up my mind."

"I shall be very lonely without you," she said, sadly, and with a sense of not being of as much importance as she might have expected to be.

"So shall I be lonely, Ruth. You don't seem to think that I am the one who has the most to bear."

"Oh, I do, dear—indeed I do."

"And, anyhow," he went on, "it won't be for long. I

shall come back soon to get you, and take you back with me. You will like that, won't you, Ruth?"

"I shall like anything that will let me be with you."

"That's my dear little Ruth. And you will like to get away from this one-horse place."

"I don't dislike the place."

"But you have some ambition, haven't you, to be something more than just a country girl?"

Ruth had quite wit enough to have given him a stinging reply to his testy question, but she reasoned that he was not himself because of his troubles, and so she refrained, and made no answer at all. And he, thinking he had silenced her with his superior logic, became more conciliatory; while she, though sore at heart, was so gentle and loving, that by the time they had reached the homestead he had grown quite cheerful and happy over the prospect of the speedy fortune he had conjured up for himself in the great, unknown city.

There was but one cloud on the horizon, and that was in the shape of Ben Eastman. He would have been glad if he could have driven that away, and more than once was on the point of speaking to Ruth about it, when he was deterred by a feeling that it would be better to defer it to some other time. For though he was proudly conscious of the fact that she was eagerly anxious to please him in all things reasonable, and in many things unreasonable, he was also uncomfortably certain that she had a delicate sense of honor and justice, and that it would be shocked by any suspicion of ingratitude toward Ben.

It was true that he was proposing to voluntarily leave Ruth, but he had already convinced himself that he was making a heroic sacrifice, much of it that she might ultimately be benefited. However, he would leave the matter of Ben Eastman to a later time.

Uncle Josh was "washing up" for supper when the lovers

came upon him. He turned with such a happy smile on his good old face, at the sight of them, that Ruth's heart sank as she thought of what Reuben would tell him. Badly as she felt, herself, there was room in her unselfish heart for sympathy for the old man, whose life was bound up in his boy.

"How be ye, Rube? How be yeou, Ruth? Met jess by accident, did ye?" and he laughed softly. "Wa-al, I wouldn't be s'rprised ef ye found Aunt Tildy hed a place set fer ye. Has second sight, mebbe. How'r things in Keene, Rube?"

"All right I guess, father."

The old man caught the gloomy tone and looked quickly at his boy, then exchanged glances of sympathy with Ruth.

"The truth is, father," Reuben was going on to say, when the old man stopped him with:

"Wa-al, things won't straighten theirselves right off. Let's have some supper, an' then talk it over, shall we Rube?"

"Just as you please, father; only I had something I wanted to say, and——"

"Yes, yes, I thought so; but after supper 'll do jest es well, won't it?"

"I suppose so; yes."

The old man's manner was a little nervous, as if he suspected something wrong, but all through the meal he kept up a constant flow of jesting remarks, though Ruth noticed that he cast frequent stealthy glances both at her and Reuben, as if he would penetrate the subject of their dismal thoughts; for Ruth was fully conscious of her inability to look happy and unconcerned, and Reuben made no effort to mask his feelings.

And after supper the old man contrived to put off the evil moment for some time, by discovering all manner of little "chores" which nobody but himself could attend to. But at last even these were exhausted, and the old man

came to where Reuben and Ruth were sitting in front of the house, and said, in a manner which betrayed his anxiety:

"Wa-al, now, what is it, Rube? Oh, here's Tildy. Set down, Tildy. Now, what is it Rube, my boy?"

"I've had an awful week over at Keene."

"Yes, yes, like's not," said the old man, sympathetically.

Aunt Tilda nodded her head and would have said something, but that she was turning a heel in the stocking she was knitting.

"When I go through the town I hear folks point me out as the man who was arrested for robbing the bank——"

"Wa-al I s'pose ye've got t' stan' thet fer a while. They don't mean nuthin' by't, do they, Tildy? eh, Ruth?"

"Five, six, seven—No-o—eight, nine," said Aunt Tilda.

Ruth said nothing, but she smiled at Uncle Joshua and slipped her hand into Reuben's, as the growing darkness gave license for her to do.

"Perhaps they don't mean anything, but I don't like it," said Reuben, gloomily. "People come into the bank for nothing else than to see me. Strangers in town are told about it and have me shown to them; the boys talk about it and run ahead of me to see the man who was arrested for robbing the bank. I tell you I can't stand it, father."

"Wa-al I know it mus' be hard, Rube, but what kin ye do?"

"I can get away from Keene."

He looked furtively at the old man as he spoke, and Ruth changed her seat so that she sat on the bench by the side of Uncle Joshua.

"Hi gun! so ye kin," exclaimed the old man in so relieved a tone that Reuben knew that he was far from suspecting the truth.

"And I have made up my mind to it to-day."

"Wa-al, mebbe ye'r right, Rube. I don't doubt it's real onpleasant t' be pinted out all th' time."

"Course it mus' be," said Aunt Tilda, who had turned her heel in safety and was now ready to take an active part in the conversation. "Folks is gene'lly purty cur'ous 'bout anything o' thet sort. When's th' trial t' come off?"

"I don't know and don't care," answered Reuben, so testily that the good lady pursed her lips and peered at him over the rims of her glasses. "All I know is I have made up my mind to go away from Keene."

Ruth laid her hand gently on Uncle Joshua's as it lay on his knee, and at its sympathetic touch the old man looked up and glanced quickly from her face to Reuben's.

"An' ye'll come back t' th' farm, will ye, Rube?" he demanded, anxiously.

"I couldn't do that, father; it would be just as bad."

"Whar then, Rube? Whar then?"

"I was thinking I would go to New York, father."

"T' New York, Rube?"

"Yes, father, to New York. It seems to me that is the best place for a young man who——"

"A big place an' a long ways off, Rube! A long ways fr'm hum an'——" as he felt the pressure of a little hand on his—"fr'm Ruth."

"I know it, father," said Reuben, hastily; "but Ruth agrees with me that it will be best; don't you, Ruth?"

"Yes, Uncle Josh, I told him that if he could not be contented here I would not urge his staying," said Ruth, a little unsteadily.

"Yes, yes. A good gal, Ruth," said Uncle Joshua, as if he could comprehend the girl's unselfishness; and he turned his toil-hardened palm upward so that her little hand rested in it. "Yes, Rube, nor I won't be th' one t' stan' in yer way ef ye kin better yerself. Besides, yer of age an' kin do es ye please; an' anyhow ef ye wa'n't it 'ud be jess the same, for I wouldn't stan' in yer way." He spoke slowly, as if to steady himself. "On'y think a minit, Rube. Here's a

good hum t' yer hand, an' ev'rything snug an' comf'table. What ef folks does talk? 't won't hurt yeou. They'll get over it by 'n by."

"It's easy for you to say that, father, for they don't talk about you. But how would you like to be the talking-stock for a disgrace, even if you were innocent?"

"Wa-al, Rube," answered the old man, with characteristic honesty, "I s'pose I'd git all-fired mad, an' feel pooty bad over it, but I don't think I'd let their talking drive me from a good hum."

"Maybe not," retorted Rube, in an injured tone; "but you can't tell what you'd do till you try it."

"Thet's so, Rube; ye never kin tell who's governor till arter election; an' ye know I feel sorry, real sorry fer ye, Rube. They ain't nothin' I wouldn't do t' help ye. But I jess want ye t' think a leetle mite over this. I don't want t' let my own feelin's stan' in th' way. I'd be lonesome 'ithout ye, Rube, an' so, I guess, 'ud Ruth, here—eh, Ruth?"

"Yes, sir."

"But we wouldn't let thet make no diff'rence, would we, Ruth?"

"No, sir."

"All we want is thet you should do what's best. I think thet's it—ain't it, Ruth?"

"Yes, Uncle Joshua."

"So, Rube, all I ask is—an' I think Aunt Tildy, 's well 's Ruth, 'll agree to 't—thet you should hear a proposition I've got t' make, an' think it over careful."

"Of course he'll think it over, Joshua," said Aunt Tilda, who was much too agitated to knit, but who put a severe restraint upon herself lest her influence should be lost when most needed. "Course he'll think on it, Joshua—won't ye, Reuben?"

"Certainly, I will. You know I will, father. Only I don't want you to think this is something sudden on my



REUBEN ANNOUNCING HIS DECISION TO START TO NEW YORK.

part, for I have been thinking of it all the week. I knew I couldn't stay in Keene, after the first day there."

"Wa-al, ye won't decide right off, will ye?"

"I don't see any use in waiting; but if you want me to wait till to-morrow——"

"To-morrer, Rube? Wa-al, 'tain't long; but I s'pose it seems long t' young blood. Wa-al, what I was a-goin' t' propose was thet you should come here an' work the farm on shares. Wait a minit afore ye speak. Don't ye see, Rube—yeou 'won't mind my speakin', Ruth—yeou could marry Ruth jest as soon es yeou two got ready. Ain't thet worth considerin'?"

Ruth blushed scarlet, and looked at Reuben with shy eagerness. It was not just according to Swanzey ways to hasten so important an event as a marriage, but she would readily consent to even that to keep Reuben away from the distant city, which to her imagination was a perfect maelstrom of wickedness.

The thought was a tempting one enough to Reuben, for he did most truly love Ruth, but perhaps there was another love a trifle stronger in his heart, and that was given with great heartiness to Reuben Whitcomb. He could not quite bring himself to let his self-love suffer; and, moreover, he had succeeded, during the week in which he had considered the matter, in firing his imagination with the triumphs he would achieve in New York, and not the least among the seductive pictures he had conjured up was one of some day making the president and directors of the Cheshire Bank sorry for their treatment of him.

He knew of no better way of meeting Ruth's eager, loving glance than by looking vexed, and he did so, as she could see, through the darkness. Then she drooped her head, and felt, in her innocent heart, that she had been unmaidenly to harbor the thought of a hasty marriage.

Reuben was about to speak, but the old man interrupted him to say:

"There! there! Don't say nuthin' now. Tek time t' c'nsider. To-morrer will do just es well. Now I'll leave ye, yeou two, t' talk it over. Come, Tildy, let's go in."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FINAL DECISION.

There was silence for some minutes after the older people had gone into the house, but it was broken at last by Reuben saying, impatiently:

"It seems to me pretty hard that a man can't make up his mind to a thing that concerns himself more than it does anybody else, without being badgered so about it."

Ruth could not suppress a faint feeling of surprise that Reuben should be so little regardful of others, but she laid his seeming selfishness to his troubles, which she, in her sympathy, had magnified almost as he had. She could not, in her partial love, imagine that he might be like many a ship which has borne itself as bravely as any other in fair winds and smooth seas, but which betrays bad calking or unsound timbers as soon as the rack of foul weather comes. But, after all, an unseaworthy ship may weather the storms of a bad passage, after betraying all its weaknesses, and go into dry dock for the repairs which can be so much better made because the weaknesses have all been discovered; and a repaired ship is often stronger than a new one.

"I don't think," said Ruth, gently, "that anybody meant to do that. We all know how you must suffer, being so sensitive; only we don't like to have you go away from us. You can't wonder at that, can you, Rube? Think how you would like to have me go away from you!"

"That's just it. Suppose you had to go away from me,

you would find it hard enough to bear without having everybody make it harder, now wouldn't you?" and Reuben grew quite cheerful with his specious argument.

"Ye-es," admitted Ruth slowly, for, woman-like, she was unable to argue the matter, though she could feel that he was wrong somehow. "But I don't think, dear, that I would leave you. But, then," she added, quickly, lest she had hurt his feelings, "I am a woman."

"Yes," he admitted, as if satisfied that the whole matter was explained thereby, "you are a woman."

"And I know, Rube, that I can't see it just as you do; but I shall be so lonely without you, and so will your father."

"I know that, and I'm sorry, of course; but you know as well as I do that we can't have everything as we want it. And really, now, Ruth, don't you think maybe you and father are a little selfish in the matter?"

Did she not think she was selfish? Well, yes, on reflection, Ruth did think she might be selfish, but she did not think Uncle Josh meant to be. And Reuben magnanimously admitted that perhaps his father might not mean to be selfish, but he insisted that Ruth surely was. So Ruth, who would not intentionally be selfish for the world, strove very hard to see that Reuben was quite right in insisting on leaving his father and her, and going off to so wicked a place as New York.

She could not rise to the heights of urging him to go, but she did the nearest to it that she could by acquiescing, with pitiful meekness, to all his arguments. And now that he had brought her to realize her selfishness, he came out very strong in argument, and was, at least, very convincing to himself. So convincing that, before they had reached her house, whither they walked, it was evident to her that his father's proposition had no chance of acceptance; and very sorrowfully she bade him good-night, until he called

her attention to the fact that it was not a very nice way to send a troubled man home, when she turned her face sweetly up to his, and said:

"I'm afraid I am selfish, Rube, but I suppose I am not as brave as I ought to be for your sake. I can't help thinking of you alone in the big city, and I here, and not able to give you a word of comfort; though I'm not much help when I am with you; and I get low-spirited. I'll try not to show it any more, Rube, dear."

"That's my brave girl. But you mustn't be low-spirited, for I shall soon be back, and some day I may be as rich as they say Henry Hopkins is. You know he left here with less money than I have, and he is rich now, and lives, they say, on Fifth avenue. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I'd like to be with you, but I'm afraid I'm not fitted for city life. I like the country."

"Oh, nonsense! You'll like it when you are used to it, and then you will see how slow it is out here. As for being fitted for it, why, you are fit for anything in this world! Aren't you the prettiest and the best girl in the world?"

"Notwithstanding my selfishness?"

"Oh, you'll get over that."

And there was something of complacency in Reuben's tone, which seemed to imply that it would be by association with himself that she was to reach the high plane of unselfishness.

However, he was well pleased with her as it was, and he left her in a happier frame of mind than he had been in since the afternoon he had told her he loved her. And one thing was finally settled—he was not going to stay either in Keene or Swanzey. He was going to New York; and that was all the consideration he gave to his father's proposition.

Work the farm on shares, indeed! He could not expect

his father to see the absurdity of his doing such a thing. His father had never been, as he had, a cashier in a bank, even though it was only a Keene bank, and he could not, therefore, expect him to enter into his ambitious feelings about the future. Work a farm already worked half to death, for one-half the profits, when New York city lay open to him! Not that he had any foolish notions about a big city. Oh, no. He knew very well that a man must work for any good thing. But he also knew that a bright, industrious young man, with a few hundred dollars to keep him for a while, could not fail to succeed anywhere.

So he was quite ready with his answer when his father should approach him in the morning. But old Joshua, with a foreboding of how it would be, put off the time as long as he could, keeping himself busy until it was time to go to meeting. Then he asked:

"Goin' to meetin', Rube?"

"No, father, I'm going over to see Ruth; she isn't going, either. But about that matter we were talking about last night, father——"

"Thet kin wait, Rube. You go over t' see Ruth, an' talk it over some more, 'n then come over here together, an' we'll all have a talk 'bout it."

"Just as you say, father, though——"

"There, there! Don't say too much jest now. Come 'long, Tildy; th' old mare don't like waitin', an' flies is bad. Come 'long."

But, as the old man, very well knew, it was not possible to put it off for very long, and, therefore, he tried to wear a cheerful face when, after dinner, he and Aunt Tilda and Ruth sat down together with Reuben at the back of the house where the shade was, and prepared for a talk which should decide the happiness of them all.

Reuben would have opened the conversation, but the old man held his hand up and said, wistfully:

"I know ye've made up yer mind, Rube, but I want t' ask ye t' c'nsider a leetle more 'fore ye giv et fer good an' all. I'm goin' t' say all I'm goin' t' now, an' ef ye think, after all, ye can't stay with us, why I won't say 'nother word. I know th' farm ain't much; still it's ourn, an's been ourn fer es long es ther's been any Swanzey. An' it'll be yourn after I'm gone, anyhow, on'y it 'ud kind o' please me ef ye could bring yerself t' stay on it. Howsoever, thet's nuther here nor thar'; th' pint I'm a comin' t' is this—what're ye goin' to, an' what're ye leavin' behin'? I know et mus' come real hard on ye to hev t' stan' bein' pinte at an' all thet, fer I know jest how sensitive ye are'n allus was—kind words allus went funder'n hard ones wi' ye; though, Rube, I don't think ye kin call t' mind many o' them sort as I've give ye, kin ye?"

"No, father," answered Rube, more subdued than he had thought to be, for he had made up his mind to a firm resistance.

"No, Rube, not es a child nor yet es a man. Wa'al, what I was 'bout t' say: I know how hard et mus' be; but yeou ain't done nuthin' ye need be 'shamed on, an' why shouldn't ye live et down? 'Twon't take long. Et's jest a wonder to 'em now, but thet'll wear off. Yer cashier here, 'n ther ain't a menny es could be thet et yeour age, ef I do say et. What could ye do in th' city? I ain't never been ther', you'll tell me, 'n I know thet; but we all know fr'm hearsay thet ther's lots o' poor folks ther, an' lots o' young men with nuthin' t' do. I tell ye, Rube, boy, et's a big resk t' take. But, ther'—I didn't mean t' do no preachin'. Et's all right here—you leave a good position 'n th' folks t' hum, 'n Ruth"—he took her hand in his with an affectionate smile—" 'n ye go t' 'n unsartainty. Thar, thet's all. Make yer choice, 'n I'll 'bide by et."

There was so much of kindly consideration, so much of unselfish affection in the old man's words and manner, that

Rube found it more difficult than he had anticipated to make his decision. Then, too, Aunt Tilda had turned her back and was rubbing her glasses, while Ruth was watching him with the unheeded tears rolling gently down her fair, round cheeks. Joshua noticed his hesitation, and with just a little quaver in his voice, said quickly:

"I don't want ye t' think o' me, Rube. I don't want ye t' decide one way 'n then regret it later, thet's all."

"Father, I won't go if you say stay."

Ruth caught the old man's hand eagerly, and brushed the tears away that she might better see his face. He stroked her hand gently, but smiled sadly as he asked:

"Would ye be c'ntented t' stay, Rube?"

"I'd try, father."

"Yeon see, Ruth," said the old man, "I can't say et. His heart is set on goin', 'n nuthin' else 'll do. Ye want t' go, don't ye, Rube?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then ye'd better go, 'n the Lord go wi' ye! An' them's words I never speak lightly. Tildy—Ruth—Rube's goin' t' New York 'n we're goin' t' send him off happy, ain't we?"

"Oh, Uncle Josh," sobbed Ruth, quite overcome, "I wish I could be as good as you."

The old man looked down at her with a fond smile, and said, softly:

"Good, eh? Umph! Wa'al, Ruth, ther's one thing sure. Es long's you're here I ain't 'fraid but Rube'll come back."

"Come back? Of course I will!" cried Reuben, in excellent spirits, for after all he had had his own way.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ROTTEN BRIDGE.

It being settled that Reuben should go away, Uncle Joshua, who could do nothing in a half-hearted way, did all in his power to assist him. And Aunt Tilda, too, although she cried in secret, put a good face upon it in public, and did marvels in the way of sewing, in order that nobody in New York should have the opportunity to say that her boy had left home not properly provided for.

Reuben told the directors of his determination to leave for New York, and persisted, in spite of anything they could say to dissuade him. And they, seeing that he was bent upon it, gave him permission to cease work at once. So, after two or three days spent in settling up his accounts, he left the bank forever, feeling as happy in doing so as if he had been held in disgraceful bondage there. With such dreams as he had of the future it could hardly be otherwise.

Ruth tried as hard, if not harder, than either Uncle Joshua or Aunt Tilda, to be so cheerful that Reuben should not have his already hard lot made any harder, for it was a carefully preserved fiction that Reuben was suffering what none of them could fairly comprehend—being so sensitive. Reuben, however, to do him justice, made no show of suffering after he had cut loose from every bond that could hold him home. He was living in the future, and, with such a future as he had laid out for himself, how could he be otherwise than contented.

He was away from Keene and all those who could look curiously at him, and he was surrounded by those whose

only thought was to keep him cheerful. Under the circumstances no one thought anything of it that he and Ruth should multiply pretexts to be together. He had not more than a week to be at home, and it was only natural that he should wish to be with her as much as possible, and they were together a great deal.

And, on the whole, in spite of her distress at the prospect of having Reuben to go away, Ruth enjoyed every one of the blissful moments with him, for not only had he recovered his gayety in the prospect of going away from home, but, in the absence of anything to feed upon, his jealousy had not tormented him.

Not that he had forgotten Ben Eastman, nor that he had given up his design of extracting a promise from Ruth to treat him with marked coolness during his absence, but that he foresaw some difficulty in obtaining the promise, and was willing to put off the time as long as possible, but he presently discovered that it was not in his power to control events, or order them to his liking.

It was Saturday afternoon, and Reuben, in accordance with a prearranged plan, was on his way to see Ruth. He was going to take her for a walk, stop at Uncle Joshua's for supper, and then return home with her, as they frequently had done recently.

He went along blithely, as a man should with such a sweetheart and such a future, and there was no thought of trouble in his mind until he reached a point on the road that overlooked the squire's house. There he stopped for a moment, taking off his hat and fanning himself with it, while he scanned the premises for a glimpse of the girl whom he was learning to love with a better love each day.

He did not see her, but there stood a horse and buggy by the gate, and as he looked with common curiosity to distinguish whom it belonged to, he felt a sudden, ugly

pang at his heart. He shaded his eyes and looked more carefully at the horse. There could be no mistake about that. It was the same horse whose speed and spirit had helped two weeks ago to save him from the disgrace of a ride through Keene in custody of the sheriff.

Ben Eastman was at the house then. What was he doing there? He might, indeed, have some business with the squire, but Reuben's jealousy would not permit him to give that possibility much weight. He thought angrily that the man might have had the common decency to keep away from the house altogether.

He was angry enough at the thought of his being at the house at all, and, therefore, was furious when, a few moments later, he saw him and Ruth walk down the garden path together, and apparently in confidential conversation. He stared at them, his face red with suppressed passion, minded at one moment to rush down to where they walked and speak his full thought of him, at the least, if not of her, and at the next moment ready to turn away with any desperate plan in view.

He remained undecided for a brief space, and then, with a muttered malediction of the man, turned hastily and walked away; not with any definite purpose in mind, but simply to get away from there for a time that he might think, or rather, that he might brood over his jealousy; for jealousy is ever unreasonable, and has but one thought—to justify itself.

It mattered very little where he went, so that he kept out of the sight of everybody, and he struck into the least frequented roads, and walked rapidly, as most in keeping with his hot thoughts. And how hot and angry they were!

He would not take the natural and reasonable view of the matter, but vehemently urged upon himself continually that he had seen Ruth with Ben with his own eyes, as if

the very seeing of them was a proof. A proof of what he could hardly have told himself. Why he should have been jealous of Ben, when, in fact, he owed him a debt of gratitude—why he should have been jealous of anybody, he, himself, could not have told. But he was jealous—madly jealous; and, moreover, he was angry with Ruth, as he told himself that she knew he did not wish her to have anything to do with Ben Eastman.

He gave no thought at first to what he should do in consideration of what he had seen, but suddenly it occurred to him that Ruth would be expecting him, and he knew it was now some time after the appointed hour. For a moment he was for turning back and going to her, but the swift second thought was that he would return home and let her guess if she could that he was angry, and why.

He had crossed the Ashuelot, and was some distance out in the country on the other side, so he made a detour, and came down to where the slate bridge crosses the river. Here, for a few minutes, his mind was diverted from his angry thoughts.

The bridge, as he approached it, bore no unusual indications, but as soon as he had entered the covered way he was startled to find that the timbers of the flooring had given way somewhere near the middle of the bridge, and were sagging perceptibly. He knew there had been talk of the dangerous condition of the bridge for some time, but he had not supposed that the timbers were as rotten as this proved.

He crossed the bridge, keeping well to one side, but even then he felt the floor give under him, and he knew that the weight of a horse crossing would inevitably cause the whole flooring to sink under it. It was so clear that nobody was aware of the condition of the bridge that he ran back again, and, with some fence rails and broken

branches, erected a sort of barricade on the end of the approach.

Then he hurried on the other side, and was about to do the same thing there, when he heard the sound of approaching hoofs, and, looking up, saw a horse coming down the hill at an unusual speed, with the driver tugging at the reins as if to check it before it became unmanageable.

The horse, which was a powerful animal, had evidently become frightened at something, and was for the time beyond the control of the driver; but it was not that fact that caused Reuben's pulses to beat so rapidly, nor was it the fact that, unless the horse was stopped very quickly, he would carry his driver to almost certain death. It was that the driver was Ben Eastman.

If he let Ben go on, or if he did his duty by calling out a warning of the danger beyond, the horse would still be beyond the control of Ben, and there would be an end of his rival. The thought certainly presented itself to Reuben, but he did not harbor it for a second. He dismissed it with a shudder, and leaped into the middle of the road with outstretched arms, yelling and gesticulating, more with the notion of frightening the horse into a stand-still than with any idea of informing Ben of the danger before him.

The hill was a steep one, however; and, with every willingness to do so, the horse would have been unable to stop, had not Reuben supplemented his cries and gestures by jumping at the animal's head, at a great risk to his own limbs, if not life, and thus dragging the now frantic creature toward the side of the road, where, plunging and struggling furiously, he was brought to a stand-still just at the entrance to the rotten bridge.

Ben, in the meanwhile, had with difficulty refrained from expressing his indignation in a violent manner; for, knowing how unfriendly Reuben was toward him, he was instinctively inclined to look upon his present action in the

light of an assault, but not only was this unlike what any sane person would ever expect from another, but it might even be justified on the supposition that Ben's horse was running away, and had got beyond his control.

But even the latter supposition was so little credible, in view of Ben's well-known expertness as a driver, that he was hardly less indignant than he would have been had Reuben really stopped him with malicious design. It was, therefore, with cutting sarcasm that he sat calmly in his buggy, while Reuben still struggled with the plunging horse, and demanded:

"Wa-al, Rube, air ye pretty near through wi' that horse?"

If Reuben had not been already too exhausted to say much, his anger at this question would probably have robbed him temporarily of the power of speech. He retained his hold of the horse's bridle, however, and panted furiously:

"Get out of the buggy!"

Ben was too angry himself to be very reasonable, but he was deliberate by nature, and upon receiving what appeared to him a challenge, and a confirmation of his first notion that Reuben had stopped his horse in order to quarrel, he wound the reins about the whip-stock, and alighted slowly from the buggy.

Then he stepped to the horse's head, and removed Reuben's hand from the bridle, after which he soothed the excited animal by words and gentle strokes of his hand, paying no attention to Reuben in the meanwhile, and finally, when his accustomed voice and calming presence had quieted the animal, he turned him about, and, facing him up hill, tied him to a tree.

Then he approached slowly, but with a dangerous light in his blue eyes, to where Reuben leaned against the mason-

work of the approach, trying to recover breath after his hard struggle.

"Wa-al, Rube Whitcomb, I'm out; what then?"

Reuben returned his glance with one no less angry, but suddenly changed it for a malicious smile, as he said, hoarsely:

"Go look at the bridge."

"Wha'at hes th' bridge——"

Ben began angrily, and then stopped, and strode to the entrance, and examined the structure.

For a few moments he saw nothing unusual, but presently his eye fell on the barricade at the other end of the bridge, and then it traveled to the floor. He saw in an instant that it was sagging. A few steps forward, and he realized what he had escaped. He paused a moment, and then turned hurriedly, and almost ran to where Reuben stood watching him with an ugly smile curling his lip.

"Rube," he cried, "like's not you've saved my life. Thar's my hand."

Reuben involuntarily put out his hand to take the one so contritely, and at the same time so gratefully, stretched out to him. But before it had seemed more than a gesture he drew it back, saying in a hoarse, low voice:

"Do you think I saved your life?"

"I 'ain't any doubt on it."

"Then we ought to be quits for what you did for me the other day."

"Wha-at, bringin' th' news from Keene? More'n quits, Rube. You'd a' heard thet soon'r 'r later anyhow, but ef yeou hedn't resked yer own self t' save me, I'd a been a goner. Yer hand, Rube."

"No," said Reuben, in the same hoarse voice. "We don't need to shake hands together. I don't like you, Ben Eastman, and I can tell you so now, for by saving your life

I have wiped out all the gratitude I owed you, or you thought I owed you, for doing what you did. You never did it for me, Ben Eastman. You did it for Ruth Stratton. Why can't you act like a gentleman, and let Ruth alone? Hasn't she told you plain enough that she didn't care for you? Why do you hang around her and pester her with your attentions? She's engaged to me, and you know it. If you were an honorable man, you'd keep away from her."

"She told you thet?" said Ben, slowly, and with a pained face, as if the thought of Ruth's betrayal of his confidence was more to him than anything Reuben could say to him. And the consciousness that he felt so stung Reuben into replying, though he knew the facts did not justify it:

"Yes, she told me that she had refused you, and I should think that would have been enough for an honorable man."

"Rube Whitcomb, I don't b'leeve you. Ruth Stratton never told yeou sech a thing. Or ef she did——" A sudden thought struck him. "Yeou talk o' gentlemen an' bein' honorable! What would Ruth think o' yeou ef she knowed yeou was tellin' sech things around?"

"You assume to know a good deal about what Ruth Stratton says and thinks!" exclaimed Reuben, hotly. "Maybe you learned something while you were sneaking around her house just now."

"Sneaking around?" repeated Ben, angrily advancing a step, threateningly.

"That's what I said—sneaking around," and Reuben drew back a pace and put himself in the attitude to repel an assault.

Ben looked him over, scornfully, and his big hands were clenched ominously, then he drew suddenly back and said:

"No, yeou did save my life, an' I can't wipe thet out, but I wish I could. Ef et was t' do over again an' I knowed I'd got to be saved by yeou or not a' tall, I'd take my

chances wi' th' bridge. Darn ye, fer a mean-sperited hound! Yer no more fit fer Ruth Stratton 'n sawdust is fit fer my horse. Yeou talk of honor! Yeou don't know what et means. Darn ye! Ef et wasn't fer Ruth, I'd chuck ye inter th' river naow."

Both men, by this time, had gradually thrown all prudential considerations to the winds, and were ready to take



"EF ET WASN'T FER RUTH, I'D CHUCK YE INTER TH' RIVER NAOW."

counsel only with their worst passions. Reuben had listened, with set teeth and clenched hands, to the words of the other as they rose from moderation to sarcasm, and from sarcasm to fury, and when he had ceased, mainly because passion had choked his utterance, Reuben shook his two clenched fists at him, crying:

"You are a liar! You can't do it."

The words were hardly out of his mouth ere Ben was upon him, and then, right there in the public road, there ensued a furious struggle, which might end in a way to make either one a horror to himself as long as he lived, for both were dominated by a passion little short of murderous.

Neither spoke. Reuben at the first assault caught Ben by the throat, and was striving with all his might to choke him, but Ben was the stronger of the two, and had torn the hand away and grappled with his assailant.

The struggle was as short as it was furious. Ben succeeded in throwing Reuben violently to the ground, falling heavily upon him as he went down. Reuben once more caught him by the throat, uttering hoarse gasps of fury, which betokened a willingness to stop short of nothing to gain the advantage. It is in such moments that murder is done.

But Ben again struck his hand aside, and the next instant his own heavy fist was raised to strike. The advantage was all his—Reuben was at his mercy. The fist came down, but stopped half way in its descent. Ben sprang hastily to his feet and ran to his horse, which he untied before Reuben had more than scrambled to his feet.

Then he gathered the reins in his hand, and with one foot on the step he turned to Reuben as he stood panting and covered with dust, and said with a sort of fierce mockery:

"I had ye at an advantage, Rube Whitcomb, 'n I could 'a done what I pleased, but I let ye go fer Ruth's sake."

He sprang into his buggy and was gone up the hill at a furious pace before Reuben could frame a reply.

Humiliated and mocked, Reuben stood there in the dust of the road and looked after the disappearing wagon, and his hot anger melted into a sullen vindictiveness which he nestled in his heart as if he would nurse it.

But even then the habit of the country-bred boy was too strong within him to let him leave the bridge unguarded, and with a strange contradiction of feeling and action he barricaded the end of the bridge where he stood, as he had already barricaded the other end. He knew without giving it any special thought that Ben Eastman would notify the proper authorities in the village of the danger.

CHAPTER IX.

RUTH'S CHOICE.

Ruth, meanwhile, having dismissed Ben Eastman, who had been to see her father on some matter of business, betook her to the front porch, there to wait for Reuben. She had fulfilled her share of the household duties and looked as sweet and dainty as a fresh blown rose in her simple gown of wash goods.

She sat in an old-fashioned, high-backed, armless rocking-chair, with some fancy work in her busy fingers, now and again looking through the openings in the honeysuckle vine to catch a glimpse of Reuben as he appeared over the brow of the hill. She was looking as pretty and as happy as she very well could; for she knew Reuben liked to see her at her best, and she was beribboned a little more than usual for his sake.

It might have been good for Reuben, could he have seen her then, for what furious mood could have lived under the influence of so much gentle goodness as beamed from her happy face? He did not see her, however, and she waited with increasing wonder at his prolonged absence.

She ran into the house at last and looked at the kitchen clock. It was nearly five, and he should have been there an hour ago. She put on her big straw hat and walked down to the gate, thinking to see him every moment, and,

then, as the time passed and he did not come, she ran into the house again to tell her sister Eleanor that she was going to meet Reuben.

She walked to the top of the hill and scanned the road, and then the fields, thinking he might have come that way to avoid being seen, for she knew he was too sensitive about being pointed at. He was not to be seen, however, and she slowly went down the road, hoping that every step would bring him in sight, but harboring in her heart a feeling of uneasiness which she could not have defined.

Finally, she grew too nervous to walk in that leisurely fashion, and she set out in good earnest for the homestead. She still hoped she might see him, but she no longer expected it, for she had made up her mind that he was sick or had been detained by some urgent business, though even so there was a vague fear in her heart.

There was no sign of life about the house when she reached there; the men were all in the fields, no doubt, but she knew she would be certain to find Aunt Tilda in the house, somewhere—probably in the kitchen, so she went around to the kitchen door, and there, as she had expected, was the good lady. But her words, instead of relieving, only tended to increase Ruth's uneasiness.

"Ruth, how be ye? Did ye hev' a nice walk?"

"I havn't been for a walk, Aunt Tilda—only to come over here."

"Want t' know! Rube said he were goin' fer a walk wi' ye?"

"Where is Rube?"

The old lady looked at her over her spectacles.

"Wa'al, I s'pose he's 'round som'eres, ain't he?"

"I don't know, Aunt Tilda; I hav'n't seen him this afternoon."

"Sho! I want t' know! He sot out fer yeour place"—she looked at the clock—"close onto two hours 'go."

"He hasn't been there, Aunt Tilda. At least he hadn't when I left, no more than half an hour ago," and she looked so distressed that Aunt Tilda said, encouragingly:

"Wa-al, I wouldn't take on; like's not Joshua's kept him. He's thoughtless 'bout sech things, sometimes. I'd wait 'n see what Joshua says; he'll be in 'fore long."

"Where is Uncle Josh?"



"HE GOT OUT FER YEOUR PLACE CLOSE ONTO TWO
HOURS 'GO."

"Aout in the garden, I guess, hoein' his limas. Th' pesky things don't seem t' grow right, nohow. Yeou know how 'tis sometimes with 'em—won't come up, an' when they do they won't climb th' poles."

"I think I'll go see Uncle Josh, if you don't care, Aunt Tilda."

"Care? Why should I? Go right aout, 'n if he ain't

there you'll find th' Ganzey boy 'baout som'eres, 'n he kin tell you where Joshua is."

And in spite of the slightly mirthful twitching of the corners of the old lady's mouth, Ruth went out to where Uncle Josh was plying his hoe; for she knew what Aunt Tilda did not, and that was that if Reuben had started from the homestead nearly two hours before, he would have reached her house in time to see Ben Eastman's horse and buggy at their gate.

She pressed her little hands together and gave a half-sob of distress, as she thought how easily Reuben was disturbed by Ben Eastman.

"Why can't he trust me more?" she murmured; but in the same instant came the excusing thought—"he loves me very much."

Uncle Josh was so busy trying to make his refractory limas climb that he did not see Ruth until she spoke. Then he looked up with the genial smile he always had for her, and said:

"How be ye, Ruth? Never see sich things es lima beans; Pat Clancy says I put 'em in a th' wrong time o' th' moon, 'n thet's why they won't climb; 'n he b'leaves he's right. Where's Rube?"

"I don't know; don't you?"

"No-o. Last I see him he was startin' off fer yeour place. Hain't he been there?"

"He hadn't been up to half an hour ago."

"Wa-al, don't be worried like thet"—for Ruth could not hide her distress—"he must 'a been hindered by somethen'. There he is naow, ef I ain't mistaken," and the old man pointed to the road where Reuben was slowly approaching the house.

It was not apparent to his father's eyes, but it was to Ruth's, that something was the matter with Reuben. His whole manner betokened it, and Ruth could even detect

the disarrangement of his clothing, though without having the faintest suspicion of the cause.

Her heart beat heavily as she hastened toward him. He either did not see her, or would not, and it was not until she was by his side and had called him by name that he looked up.

Then she saw better than before that his clothes were dusty and disheveled, that his face was bruised, and that he



"HOW BE YE, KUTH! WIIERE'S RUEB?"

bore every evidence of having been in a struggle of some sort; but what struck her more than anything else was the dogged, sullen set of his features. Her heart sank with a foreboding that Ben Eastman was in some way concerned with Reuben's altered appearance.

"Oh, Reuben," she cried, "what has happened? What is the matter?"

They were near the house, but they were alone and out of the sight of anybody. Reuben returned her tender, loving glance with a bitter, scornful one, and answered, with suppressed passion:

"I met your friend Ben Eastman after he left you, and this is the result."

"Oh, Rube," she cried, sorrowfully, putting her hand gently on his arm, "you don't mean——"

"I mean that I fought with him, and would have killed him if I could."

The gesture with which he shook her hand off his arm, the white passion of his face, and the sullen glare of his eye, frightened Ruth, and she shrank back from him. He saw it, and laughed, in an ugly way.

"You thought I owed him a debt of gratitude, didn't you? Well, I wiped that out first by saving his life. If ever you speak to him again, ask him if it is not so. He admitted that the debt was in my favor. Then we fought. I wish I had let him cross the rotten bridge. It would have been the end of him, and it would have saved you the trouble of making a choice between us."

"Oh, Rube, what are you saying? Come into the house before anybody sees you."

He laughed, in an ugly, sneering fashion, that grated on her ear, and answered:

"What does it matter who sees me? That cur will spread it all over the county before dark that he whipped me in a fight about you. Yes, does it please you to know that he beat me?"

Was he mad, that he talked so to the frightened, shrinking girl before him?

"Oh, Rube, how can you?" she sobbed.

"How can I? How can you? It was your fault. Why need you have anything to do with him when you knew I hated him? Didn't I see him at your house this afternoon,

walking down the path with you close by his side? Do you think I am a fool to stand it? You will choose between us. You cannot have two strings to your bow. It is to be one or the other of us. Shall it be I or Ben Eastman?"

She stopped crying, and a calmer man would have seen that the sweet lines of her pretty face were setting in a way that showed the possession of more spirit than the casual observer would have credited her with. A quick retort was on her lips, but she checked it, and said, quietly:

"You are not yourself, Reuben, or you would not talk so. Come into the house, won't you?"

"Not until you have made your choice between us. I will not be your plaything any longer."

"Reuben," she said, with something like pity in her voice, "why won't you be reasonable? You are not fit to talk of this now."

"As fit as I ever shall be," he answered, with sullen passion, "and I want an answer."

"I will talk with you about it to-morrow," she said, sadly, turning and moving away.

"Stop, Ruth!" he cried, hoarsely, "this must be settled now, one way or the other. If you go away now without giving me my answer, you will never have another opportunity."

She turned quickly, and any one could have seen that she was laboring to hold herself in check.

"Reuben," she said, with long, difficult breaths between each word, "I have told you once that I loved you. An honest woman can love but one man. I have not only told you that I loved you, but I have tried to show it in every way possible. It is an insult to me to say what you do about Ben Eastman."

"You must promise me never to speak to him again."

"Must?"

"Yes, must, or give me up."

"I must make the choice?"

The brown eyes, usually so soft and loving when they looked on Reuben, were flashing dangerously now.

"Yes," he answered, sullenly, "you must choose."

"I warn you not to force me to do it, Reuben Whitcomb."

"You cannot bear to give him up," sneered Reuben, blinded by passion.



"WHEN YOU REALIZE THAT YOU HAVE INSULTED ME,
COME AND SEE ME. UNTIL THEN, GOOD-BY."

"You have said enough now. I will listen to no more. I am going home. When you realize that you have insulted me, and am willing to ask my pardon, come and see me. Until then, good-by."

She turned proudly and walked away, he looking after her, in sullen silence.

CHAPTER X.

SUE VISITS RUTH.

Ben Eastman, meanwhile, stopping only to tell Squire Porter of the break in the bridge, drove home in a more unamiable frame of mind than it had ever before been his fortune to be in. His whole sense of honor, justice, and fair dealing had been outraged by the attack made upon him by Reuben.

He knew Reuben was jealous of him, but he knew also with how little reason; and in any case it would not have been possible for him to enter into the feelings of the other, since he was not of a jealous nature himself, and could not therefore comprehend the vehement, self-torturing unreasonableness of the passion.

Moreover, his love for Ruth was of such a generous character that he trembled for her happiness when it should be put in the keeping of such a man as he now conceived Reuben to be. He had not liked Reuben over much at any time, but he had submitted to the inevitable when he found that Ruth loved him. Now, however, with the prospect of Ruth's unhappiness before him, he was inclined to rebel against fate.

And now, too, he found himself thinking of what his Cousin Sue would say to the latest development of the matter. He was sure she would applaud him for doing as he had, unless, indeed, she upbraided him for not punishing Reuben more than he had, when he had not only the opportunity but the provocation as well. And she would be sure to urge him, as she had not ceased to do since the night when he had told her of the engagement, to persist in his

suit with Ruth. And that, too, in face of the fact that he had told her that Reuben was jealous of him.

He had steadfastly refused to act in any such way, however, in spite of her expressed contempt and scorn; for, from his standpoint, such a course would have been dishonorable. But now, he found himself, as he thought of Sue, weighing the matter in his mind, and wondering if it might not, after all, be better for Ruth if she could be persuaded to give up a man who could only make her unhappy, and give herself into the keeping of one who at least would find it impossible to see anything wrong in any of her actions.

He had not fully made up his mind to tell Sue of the fracas, when he went into the house on his return, but it was impossible to keep it from her, for she watched him now so closely that it seemed as if she was aware of his very thoughts. Never before had she taken such an interest in his affairs as she had now, and, had he been a little quicker of perception, he would have remembered that it was on an errand of her making that he had gone to the squire's that afternoon.

The moment he entered the house her eye took in all the details of his dusty and disordered clothing, and of his disturbed face, and her question was quick and peremptory.

"What's happened?"

"Wha-at d'ye mean?"

"Something's gone wrong. What?"

He looked himself over, as if in wonder that she could be sure of that, and then answered:

"Wa-al, I had a clinch with Rube Whitcomb."

"A what?" And she questioned him with flashing eyes.

"A clinch was Rube."

"Did you hurt him?"

"No-o; I rolled him in the dust, but I didn't hurt him."

"You brute!" she angrily muttered. Then, aloud, "Tell me about it."

"It musn't go no further, Sue. 'Twouldn't be right."

"Since when have I been a gossip?"

"That's so. Wa-al, it seems he must 'a seen me at the squire's house, an' got all-fired jealous, like a fool, an' first thing I know he was waitin' fer me at the slate bridge. The bay was goin' down the hill 'most on a dead run, skeered at suthin', an' Rube jumped at his head and stopped him."

"Ah!" and her eyes snapped with pleasure.

"I was kind o' mad, thinkin' he was doin' it fer cussedness; but I diskivered pooty soon that the bridge was dangerous, an', like's not, he'd saved my life. I thanked him, an' wanted to shake han's with him, but he said it only squared 'counts fer when I saved him bein' 'rested."

"Just like him!" murmured Sue, with deep admiration.

"He was mad an' said things that made me mad, an' then we had a clinch."

"And he got the worst of it?"

"Yes; I throwed him, an' could a' done what I liked."

"Why didn't you do anything?"

"I didn't want to; an' besides, I thought o' suthin' I thought 'ud hurt him more'n bein' pounded."

"And what was that?"

"I was jest a-goin' to hit him, an' I stopped an' told him I'd let him off for Ruth's sake."

Sue looked at him so vindictively that, if he had seen her, he might have had some suspicion of her value as a confidante; but he did not see, for he was looking down at the table, moodily tracing figures on its white surface, after the manner of a man not at all well pleased with himself—and he was not, when he came to rehearse what he had done. It

seemed to him now that the burden of obligation had been shifted to his shoulders, and that he had been lacking in that very gratitude, the want of which in Reuben he had secretly condemned. He might have been more patient, he told himself.

Sue seemed to know intuitively what was passing in his mind, for, with a shrug of the shoulders, she said:

"You let him off too easy. I wonder what Ruth will say to such a lover?"

"She'll never know about it."

"Do you think that? How dull you are! She'll be the first to find it out."

"Do you think so, Sue? Oh, what will she think o' me?"

"Think? She'll think more o' you than ever. Now's your time to win her."

"Oh, Sue!" groaned the honest fellow, "I'll never dare to look at her again."

"Sho!" exclaimed Sue, contemptuously, turning away. Then, as a sudden thought came to her, she turned back again, and, with an entire change of manner, said, sympathetically, "Mebbe you're right, Ben; she won't like it, will she? Look here, Ben, you want her good opinion more'n anything else, don't you?"

"Sartain."

"Do yeou want my advice?"

"What is it?"

"Yeou mean yeou'd like to hear it, 'n then leave it if it don't suit you, eh?"

"I'd like t' hear it, Sue, but yeou don't always see things same as I do."

"I sh'd think not," she muttered, in a sneering undertone, but said, aloud, "Of course not. Wa-al, what I'd do if I was yeou, 'd be to go to Ruth right off, n' tell her

yeou're ashamed t' have done what ye did. It 'll show yeou've got the courage to own up when yeou're wrong."

He looked up with an air of surprise at such counsel from his fiery cousin, whose own plan, from earliest childhood, had been to hold out in proportion as she was wrong. Her face showed she was in earnest, however, and he looked down at the table and studied the advice. It had been



"OH, SUE," GROANED THE HONEST FELLOW, "I'LL NEVER DARE TO LOOK AT HER AGAIN!"

cunningly devised to fall in with his notions of right, and presently he looked up with a relieved expression, and said, heartily:

"Thank ye kindly, Sue. I'll do it."

"An' I'll go with yeou, Ben. She might not want to see yeou if yeou went alone, mebbe."

"Thank ye, Sue," he said, gratefully.

And thus it happened that after Sue had cleared away the supper dishes, and Ben had fulfilled his duties, the two cousins set out for the house of Squire Stratton, walking, because the night was a fine one, and the distance not great.

She had known nothing of Reuben's appointment with Ruth, and had contrived Ben's appointment of the afternoon on the chance of some mischief resulting from it. So her visit with Ben this evening was conceived in ignorance of what had actually occurred, but with an intuitive sense that trouble must have resulted from Reuben's interrupted meeting with Ruth, and subsequent encounter with Ben. She devised a pretext on which Ben could ask to see the squire, and so deprive Ruth of any reason for resenting his visit.

Ruth was not in the kitchen when they went in, and for a few moments Sue was afraid that she was not at home; but as Ben had retired to the squire's office to discuss with him the alleged matter of business, she asked for Ruth.

Ruth's sisters knew nothing of the details of the trouble between Reuben and their sister, but they knew that something had happened to make her very unhappy, and, had it been possible, they would have shielded her from the curious eye of their visitor.

"She felt tired, and went up to her room as soon as supper was cleared away," answered Eleanor to Sue's question.

Sue's eyes snapped, for the answer gave her the hope she had longed for. She was determined now to see Ruth.

"Sorry for that," she said, sympathetically; "for I came over particular to see Ruth. Is she too tired to see me?"

The two sisters exchanged hesitating glances, and by that process known only to the female mind, telegraphed to each other, after which Eleanor said she would go to Ruth and ask her. Sue intercepted the glances, and interpreted them. She called after Eleanor as she left the room:

"If Ruth doesn't want to come down, I'll go right up to her room."

Ruth was not lying down when her sister softly knocked at her door. She was sitting by her open window, her elbow on the sill, and her chin in her hand. Eleanor had hoped she was lying down and had not heard her gentle knock, and she was disappointed on opening the door, in response to Ruth's invitation, to see her by the window.



ELEANOR PUT HER HAND ON HER SISTER'S SHOULDER.
"SUE EASTMAN IS DOWN STAIRS."

"I thought perhaps you had gone to sleep," she said.

"No," answered Ruth; and her sister knew she had been crying.

She went over and put her hand sympathetically on her shoulder, saying, softly:

"Sue Eastman is down stairs. She says she came over

especially to see you, so I came up. Shall I tell her that you are too tired to-night?"

Instinctively it came into Ruth's mind that this visit might have some connection with the encounter between Reuben and Ben, and she hastily answered:

"No, no, I will see her. Would you mind, Ellie, letting her come up here? I don't want to go down stairs."

Eleanor opened her eyes, but discreetly said nothing, feeling that Ruth was not in a mood to be advised, and moreover, not knowing how to advise had she been so minded. If Ruth had not taken her into her confidence it was because she did not wish to do so.

So the two sisters, who would have done anything for the sister whom they adored, sat down stairs and wondered, while Sue went up to entrap her confidence if it could be done.

It was not, by any means, Sue's habit to be sly; on the contrary, she was rather given to an unpleasant frankness, which in spite of her personal advantages in the way of beauty and wit, had caused her to be both feared and disliked; but in this instance she was willing to be anything which should enable her to accomplish her end of separating Reuben and Ruth.

She knew in a moment that Ruth had been crying, and she exulted in the fact, for the comfort it gave her, and she comprehended, too, that Ruth was anxious to talk about Ben and Reuben, and that was why she had been willing to see her and to see her alone.

"Of course you know why I have come over here, Ruth," she said, in a tone of simulated sympathy.

"I suppose so," faltered Ruth.

"I know all about it," said Sue, "and I am very indignant."

It was such a relief to have somebody to talk to about her trouble, that Ruth hardly considered Sue's

usually unsympathetic nature, and with a burst of tears cried out:

"Isn't it dreadful! Oh, why will men do such things?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Ruth. Ben is very sorry for his part in it, and has come around here with me to apologize to you."

"What good will it do to apologize now? Why did he come here at all?"



"ISN'T IT DREADFUL! OH, WHY WILL MEN DO SUCH THINGS!"

There was such a plain admission of trouble between Reuben and herself in the words of Ruth, that Sue would need to have been much more stupid than in fact she was to have any further doubt of the brilliant success of her planning.

"Ben meant no harm, Ruth," she said. "Don't yeon believe Reuben will listen to reason?" she ventured.

But Ruth was already sorry for what she had said, and would not be drawn into any further discussion of that part of the subject, though she was willing to talk with Sue about what had happened between Reuben and Ben. And Sue, on her side, was quite willing to talk as much as Ruth would have her, glad to have gained the chance admission of the troubled girl, and, already, seeing how she could turn it to her own advantage.

When she discovered that Ruth only knew that there had been an encounter between the two men, she described it in detail, taking great care to make it all redound to the credit of Ben, even while she kept up a running fire of blame against him for even the accident of taking the same road that Reuben was on.

The true story, unfortunately, needed very little distorting to show Ben in a more favorable light than Reuben, but where any distorting would help the story, Sue had no hesitation in resorting to it.

Poor, guileless little Ruth was quite at the mercy of her more cunning and unscrupulous rival, and when Sue left her she was ten times more miserable than she had been.

Badly as she had felt at putting up a barrier between herself and Reuben, she had felt that it was the only course she could adopt with due regard to her own self-respect; and, while she had had no thought of yielding until Reuben had apologized, she had hoped that he would soon see that he had been wrong, and would then act as she fondly believed his real nature would prompt him. But now, in the light of what Sue had told her of his words and actions toward Ben at the bridge, it seemed to her that there was no room for hope that he would see himself in error.

Sue had wished her to see Ben and hear his apology, but she had pleaded the tears, which had not ceased to flow while Sue was telling of Reuben's conduct, and Sue had de-

sisted and gone away without making any further effort to bring a meeting about.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT A WOMAN DID.

Had Reuben loved Ruth less, he might have found comfort in his egotism; as it was, the most his egotism could do for him was to persuade him that he had done only what was right in treating Ruth as he had. And that was no easy task, for now and again a picture of Ruth, sweet, trusting, and unselfish, would come up before him and almost move him to acknowledge himself wrong. Ah, that he might have been able to see himself in that light but once!

He had silently watched Ruth go away from him, obstinately stifling the good impulse that prompted him to utter the word that would have brought her back to his side. He had stood there, in the road, and seen her walk sorrowfully away, and though the love in his heart cried out to be recognized, he would heed only the voice of rage which swelled and rumbled in his brain, and he had sullenly looked after her until she was out of sight.

Once she had turned her face toward him, and there was that in the slight movement of her hands which seemed to beg him to take counsel of his better self, but he had not opened his lips or given an answering sign, and she had gone out of his sight.

Then he roused himself and moved sullenly toward the house, but a sudden thought of how he would be questioned about Ruth, made him turn away and cross the fields to a piece of woods, where he knew he would be out of sight. He could not bear human companionship at that moment.

Out in the woods, he flung himself on the soft leaves, and gave himself up to the rack of self-torture. And

there he lay until dusk came on, when he stole out of the woods and took unfrequented paths into the country beyond, finding a dismal pleasure in feeling that he was a sort of outcast.

And he walked until he was weary and foot-sore, taking a kind of credit to himself for even that, as if there was a merit in self-torture. But the exercise was better for him than lying on his face, letting his humiliation and jealous rage suggest thoughts which lacked only opportunity to convert themselves into evil acts.

It had even come into his mind to make this his final departure from home. He knew he would thus cause comment and distress, and it entered his thoughts that he might be believed dead. If so, would not Ruth regret refusing to give him her promise? But, after all, that was not nearly as seductive as the thought of going away and making a fortune, and then coming back to show them all what a mistake they had made in treating him as they had.

Perhaps he would have had no little difficulty in specifying in what respect he had been ill-treated, but he did not force himself to particularize, and it was enough for him to make an assertion to himself, to believe it.

As always happens, the exercise he was taking dispelled the more dismal thoughts from his mind, and he began to find his greatest pleasure in dwelling on the success he would have in New York, and how, when success was achieved, he would return to Swanzey.

He could easily picture the chagrin of Ben Eastman, and of the directors of the bank; but when he tried to fix Ruth's part in the future, he found himself somewhat at a loss; he wanted her to feel badly, but he wished to benefit by her repentance.

The pleasantest picture he conjured up of the future, was of his return from New York, rich and powerful, Ruth

still single, mourning him, refusing to even look at Ben Eastman, as the cause of all her trouble, and begging him for his forgiveness, which he would give magnanimously.

But when he had begun to admit to himself, that in any case, Ruth was necessary to his perfect happiness, it also came into his mind that it would be a very unpleasant thing to go away from her, leaving her free to marry Ben if she wished. Not that he would yield, not he; but he could not help dwelling on Ruth's goodness and gentleness, and, as he dwelt, it came over him that it would be better, if it were possible, to go away at peace with her.

It did not occur to him as a possible thing that it would become his manhood to yield without any question as to his being right or wrong; he only tried to think of some plan whereby he could become reconciled to Ruth without any loss of what he was pleased to style his dignity.

He was willing to admit that he had not been as calm as he might have been in talking to Ruth, though, in view of his provocation, he was disposed to fully forgive himself for that; but he could not see that he had been anything but right in demanding the promise he did of Ruth.

He did not acknowledge it to himself; but he had an instinctive feeling that quiet, gentle Ruth would never come to him and ask his forgiveness for her contumacy; but he did think that if he but gave her the opportunity she would meet him more than half way, so as to preserve to him the appearance of having had his own way.

This is what he decided to do then. He would take a few of the little things Ruth had from time to time given him, and would carry them over to Ruth and solemnly return them to her in the morning, feeling sure that she would not go to meeting with the others. He would not retract an iota of what he had said, but he would be ready to forgive her at the first sign of repentance, and he would be a lenient judge of what constituted the first sign.

He did not abate a jot of his hatred for Ben, but he felt a great deal happier when he had come to the conclusion to go see Ruth on the morrow, and he turned his steps homeward in a great deal better frame of mind than when he had left there.

It was quite late, and he was hungry as well as tired; but he knew he could get something to eat without arousing suspicion that he had eaten nothing, and he would then let them think that he had been with Ruth, for he knew they would assume that to be the case.

A night's restful sleep only disposed him the more toward his plan of effecting a reconciliation with Ruth, but he made up his little package of gifts to be returned—not very precious from a money point of view, but precious enough to Reuben—with a feeling that he would certainly bring them back with him.

And it was quite likely that he would, for, without saying as much to himself, he was nevertheless of such a mind now that he would stop very little short of apologizing, rather than not be reconciled with Ruth. If there had been more time, he might have been more obdurate, but this was his last day at home, and he could not think of letting it go by with the chance that Ruth might come to him.

It was quite true that he had said he would never give Ruth another opportunity to say that she loved him, but he was angry then, and he was calm now. Besides, he knew perfectly well that Ruth would never remind him of that, and he made up his little package with great cheerfulness.

His father wanted him to go to meeting on this, his last Sunday at home; but Reuben told him he was going to see Ruth, and the old man went off with Aunt Tilda, without any further word.

Reuben waited until he was sure that he would not be likely to meet any stragglers on their way to meeting, and

then set out for Ruth's house, with his heart beating rather more violently than he could account for.

At the gate he stopped and drew back with a sudden flush. Sue Eastman was coming his way. He would have retreated out of sight had that been feasible, but it was not, for she had seen him, and had nodded and smiled, so that he had nothing to do but await her approach, and let her get well ahead of him, before he started.

It was very unpleasant to meet one of Ben's relatives at such a time, but the best way was to put a bold face upon it, and conduct himself as circumstances made expedient. Perhaps he dreaded meeting Sue less than he would have any other of Ben's people, for he had always liked her. She seemed to have a faculty of putting him on good terms with himself. She might be sarcastic and sharp with others, but to him she had always been most considerate.

Nevertheless, he did not know what her attitude toward him would be now, supposing that she had been informed by Ben of what had occurred. Therefore he waited for her with some perturbation. Her tone and manner when she spoke, however, set his mind at rest. Both were as friendly as they ever had been, and as free from the sharpness which made her dreaded by others. Indeed, if there was any difference in her tone, it was rather in the direction of increased friendliness.

"How be yeou, Rube?" she asked, stopping as she came to where he stood. "Aunt Tildy ain't at home, I s'pose?"

"No, she's gone to meeting. Did you want to see her?"

"Twan't about nothin' particular, Rube," she said, flushing, and looking a trifle conscious, whereupon Reuben could not help seeing that she was a very fine-looking girl.

"Is it anything I can do for you? Won't you come in, Sue?"

He would have liked it better if she had refused, but he

could do no less than ask, since it seemed that she had come over with a purpose.

"Only for a minute, Rube. Were you going out?"

And she looked curiously at the package in his hand.

It was his turn to flush, and he did so unmistakably. Sue noted it, and her eyes flashed under their long, dark lashes.

"Yes," he answered, with a poor assumption of carelessness. "I was going out, but there's no great hurry."

"Going to see Ruth Stratton, I guess, ain't yeou? Would if I was yeou, Rube."

"What do you mean, Sue?"

"Oh, well, 'tain't none of my business," she answered, in a pitying way. "I guess, if Aunt Tildy ain't in, I'll be going."

"Wait a minute, Sue. What did you mean by that?"

"I hadn't no business to say it at all, Rube. It just slipped out."

"But you meant something. What was it?"

"There, now, Rube, what's the use taking it like that! It's no more'n natural for a man to go see his sweetheart, is it?"

"That wasn't what you meant. Will you tell me what you did mean?"

"No; I won't. Nobody could ever say that I was a mischief maker."

She turned as if she would go.

Reuben sprang out of the gate, which he had been holding open, and laid his hand on her arm. All the jealous fears which a night of peace had allayed sprang into vigorous life at once at the first breath of suspicion.

"You have no right to go without telling me what you mean, Sue. I wouldn't treat you so."

She turned to him with pity and distress on her face.

"What good will it do for me to say anything? If I

can't say anything pleasant I'd rather not say anything at all. Yeou'd better not ask me, Rube."

"But I do ask you," he said, hoarsely. "Look here, Sue, you've always been a friend of mine, if you are Ben's cousin——"

"Ben's cousin," she interrupted, scornfully. "Yeou don't suppose that because he's my cousin that I think everything he does is right, do yeou? I don't, Rube Whit-



"SUE," HE SAID, HOARSELY, "IF YOU ARE A FRIEND OF MINE, YOU WILL TELL ME WHAT YOU MEAN."

comb, and that's what I——. But there, I won't say anything. If I don't see yeou again before yeou go, good-by, Rube. And I'd like yeou to think yeou have one good friend in Swanzey. Good-by. Won't you shake hands?"

She seemed very much affected, and perhaps it was not all acting. Reuben took the hand she had held out in her agitation, but it was only to restrain her from going. She

flashed a singular look at him as he held her hand, and made no effort to withdraw it from his grasp.

"Sue," he said, hoarsely, "if you are a friend of mine, as you say, you will tell me what you mean. I have a right to be told."

"Don't ask me, Rube, I'll be sorry if I tell yeou."

It was singular, but even then, while his heart was racked by jealousy because of Ruth, he was pleased with the consciousness that here was a woman, beautiful, too, and feared by most others, who yet was almost submissive to him. The sense of controlling the will of such a one as Sue gave him a masterful feeling. He became more peremptory.

"I must ask you. You must tell me. What is it, Sue?"

"You will hate me if I tell yeou, and I do not want yeou to go away feeling so toward me."

"I think I shall hate you if you don't tell me."

"But it isn't much, after all."

"Never mind. Tell me."

"It's more suspicion than anything else, and you'll hate me for telling yeou."

"No, I won't. I must know."

"Besides, Ben is my cousin, after all," she said, as if to herself.

"Will you tell me or not? Talk of hating you if you do tell me! I shall hate you if you do not tell me."

"But I may be all wrong," she persisted, as if to further madden the wretched man.

He flung her hand angrily away from him, and turned from her.

"Do as you please," he said, sullenly.

"Why, Rube," she cried, "I will tell yeou, if yeou must hear it, but I thought yeou'd be happier not to have me."

"Happy!" he exclaimed, scornfully.

"Well, it's only this, Rube, if yeou will have me speak."

"I'll never forget you if you will be my friend now, Sue. It may seem like nothing to you, Sue, for you have never been in love maybe——"

"Never in love!" she cried, vehemently, and then stopped suddenly. "Well, perhaps I never was, but if I had been, Rube, I would be true to the man I gave my love to. It doesn't seem nothing to me, Rube. If I didn't feel sorry for the way yeou have been treated I wouldn't have let out what I did, so that yeou could make me say what I don't want to."

"You will tell me then, Sue?"

"Yes, I will, and I don't care what comes of it. I've known you these many years, and I know how true-hearted you are, Rube. I wouldn't say such a thing any other time, but I can't help it now, when I think it all over. I always did like you, Rube—I didn't mean to say that, but it's said and I won't take it back. But we always was friends and I won't see yeou put upon. I s'pose Ben will be fit to put me out of the house if he finds out I told it."

"He shall never know from me, Sue. I am glad you came when you did. Now tell me."

He drew her to the side of the road and flung himself down on the grass, while she sat down by his side.

"Shall I begin from where I first knew Ben was in love with Ruth?"

"I don't care where you begin."

"Well, I always thought Ruth was in love with Ben, too. I never thought of yeou caring, and maybe she didn't at the first. When yeou did, I s'pose it was only natural she should be flattered. I s'pose maybe Ben's got more money, now, than yeou, but Ruth wa'nt blind not to know that yeou had the future. I hope I would not do it, but yeou can't blame her if she took yeou, even if she liked Ben. Most girls would have done the same."

"What makes you think she loved Ben?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Well, one thing and another; but that don't matter. I only spoke of it because it seemed to explain why she should act as she does now."

"Doesn't matter? But go on."

"Now, mind, Rube, I don't mean to defend Ben, only he always did love Ruth; and if he thought she liked him more'n anybody else, he was not so much to blame if it made him mad to find you'd got in ahead of him. It was only natural that he should try to get her away from yeou, now wa'n't it?"

"I wish I'd let him go over that bridge," muttered Reuben.

"What?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"I won't say she encouraged him after you'd proposed, for I don't know it. All I know is that he would go to her house, and would meet her on the road when he could, and you mustn't blame him so very much, Rube."

"I don't care about him."

"And maybe I'm all wrong about her, Rube. I don't want to say anything to part yeou two."

"You needn't be afraid. What else?"

"Yeou know he went to see her yesterday afternoon, when she was expecting to have yeou come. Maybe he thought he'd get away before you got there—I don't know."

"If he knew I was going to be there, she must have told him of it," said Reuben, with sullen fierceness.

"I don't say he did know it, Rube. Don't be sure of it till yeou know. All I do know is that he made believe he had an errand with the squire, when he hadn't none at all."

"What does that prove, I'd like to know?"

"Yeou don't know she had anything to do with it, any more'n she had with his going to see her last night."

"Last night?"

"Yes, last night. That wasn't right of Ben, and I'm not going to say it was. He told me how he'd met yeou at the bridge, and—and——"

"Oh, I don't care what he said. I don't care much for anything. I only wish I'd let him alone when he was coming down that hill. Did he go to see her last night?"

"Yes, and I wouldn't let him go alone. It wasn't

right of him. I don't say he'd got Ruth away from yeou, for I can only tell from what he says. and a man like that will sometimes say things that're not quite true—don't you know he will?"

"Did he say that he'd got Ruth away from me?"

"I won't say he did say just those words. He did say as much as that, if it hadn't been for Ruth, he'd have pounded yeou down by the bridge. I'd go see Ruth if I was yeou, and have a fair talk with her."

"Never! If she likes him best, she's welcome to him."

"It doesn't seem as if it could be, Rube. She took yeou when she had her fair choice, and I don't believe Ben when he says she's tired of your jealous ways."

"That shows she's been talking with him. Well, if she's satisfied, I am."

And Reuben, with an air he vainly tried to make indifferent, rose to his feet.

He had all along kept his face as much as he could from Sue's eyes, but now, as he arose, she caught a look at his face, and it startled her. It was vindictive, as she had expected; it was not drawn and haggard, like that of one who has received an overpowering blow.

"Yeou'll go see Ruth, won't yeou, Rube?" she asked him.

"No; why should I?" he asked, wearily.

"I may be all wrong."

"Yes, you may be. Sue, I was just going to see her when you came. I thought she loved me, and I had been angry yesterday, and I was going to make it up. You have saved me that trouble, Sue. I guess it was my own fault; I don't know. Perhaps I was right, after all. Well, that's over, and I sha'n't need to regret going now."

"But suppose I should be wrong?"

"Well, there is nothing to prevent Ruth coming over here to see me, if she does love me best. I don't know how I can believe it of her, Sue."

"Yeou won't go away without seeing her, will yeou?"

"If she comes here, I will see her; not otherwise."

"I'm afraid yeou'll never forgive me for what I have done, Rube."

"I shall always thank you, Sue."

"At least yeou will know that yeou leave one true friend behind yeou?"

"Thank you."

He appeared to hesitate about asking something, and she said at once:

"What is it?"

"Would you mind doing something for me, Sue? I wouldn't ask anybody else, only you know all about it, and it makes it easier."

"I'll do anything I can for yeou, Rube."

"I'd like to know something about Ruth after I'm gone."

"And yeou want me to write to yeou about her?"

"Yes, if you will."

"Of course I will."

CHAPTER XII.

THE GOING AWAY.

It may be asked if Sue was so steeped in wrong-doing that she could work the destruction of two people's happiness without a qualm of conscience. No. She almost hated herself for what she was doing, but she was of an ungovernable, passionate nature, and little used to denying herself anything she wanted. She had long ago given all the love of her nature to Reuben, and she had determined to possess his in return.

Besides, she was wildly ambitious, and yearned to escape the drudgery of the farm-house where she had passed all of her life that she could recall. It seemed to her that Reuben would lift her higher than any of the other young men she knew, and so, her inclination and her advantage both leading her the same way, she had given all her thoughts to Reuben, and had come to look upon him as her own.

She knew full well what a risk she was taking in trying to separate the lovers, but she was willing to take the consequences of a failure, and trusted to chance to help her. And as chance had already seemed to befriend her, so it did now.

Ben's actions she could control through her superior wit, and Reuben's she had, by her deceitful practices, directed so they would cause her no trouble. What Ruth would do was her only anxiety. She did not believe she would go to Reuben, but she dreaded that she might. She determined,

on leaving Reuben; to go to Ruth, though she could not decide upon what to say to fix her resolution not to go to Reuben.

And here it was that chance befriended her. Her wife might have fallen harmless before the direct honesty of Ruth, but the gentle girl, having hoped all through the evening that Reuben would come to her, had gone weeping to bed, to wake in the morning with such a nervous headache as did not permit her to think of getting up.

Perhaps if Reuben had come to her she would have found a cure in her joy; but he did not come, and she did not get up, and Sue went from her house feeling that fate was with her.

As for Reuben, all the fierce wretchedness of the day before seemed to have worked itself out of his nature; for all he felt, now, was a dull despair, mingled with some self-pity. He wondered at his violence of yesterday, wondered to find himself so quiet now.

And when he thought of Ruth and how she had loved him less than she had Ben, it seemed to him that life was too miserable a thing to look forward to. Even his bright dreams of the future were nothing to him now.

He went to his room again, and this time took out all the little gifts of Ruth, and, instead of putting them together to return to her, laid them carefully away; for now that he was so very much more in earnest, he realized that it would be only foolish to return to her what she had probably forgotten all about.

But he wrote her a little note, in which he made no attempt to explain how he felt—that seemed unnecessary now. What did she care how he felt? It consisted of but a few words, and read:

"I will save you the trouble of any more words by saying that I accept our parting of yesterday as final.

REUBEN."

He would have liked, then, to go away from the house as he had done the night before; but he knew it would not be possible to keep out of the sight of everybody, and so he resigned himself to meeting his father's questions about Ruth, trusting to be able to answer them in such a way that Joshua would not suspect anything wrong.

How he did get through the afternoon, he could hardly have told; but it was over at last, and he was free to leave

the house, going, as his father and aunt supposed, to see Ruth, but in fact wandering about the country like a lost soul, hardly conscious of what he was doing.

When he returned home the old folks looked wonderingly from his drawn face to his dusty boots, and exchanged glances, but said nothing until he was gone, when they told each other that he was feeling "pooty bad t' hev t' leave hum."

Then Aunt Tilda rubbed her glasses, and Uncle Josh blew his nose with great violence, and both, with one accord, began to push the chairs back to their places in the room, preparatory to going to bed.

As Reuben was to go early in the morning, it was necessary that everything should be looked after in good season, and that is why old Joshua was up by starlight, no doubt, fussing about the stable and doing a great many things which usually he let the hired help attend to.

And probably that was the reason why Aunt Tilda had his valise down stairs at the same time that Joshua was out in the stables. The good soul had already packed the valise three times, but it was not to suit her, and now she was packing it for the fourth time, patting each separate article with the same affection that she would have stroked her boy's hair had he not grown too big for that sort of thing.

And everybody but the Ganzey boy, who never lost sleep for anybody, seemed affected by the same extraordinary desire to work, and it was hardly daylight when breakfast was on the table. And perhaps it was because Reuben was not there with them that none of them ate, always excepting the Ganzey boy, who, having been dragged out of bed, was prepared to eat for all of them.

However, there comes a time for all things, and so there came a time when Reuben must come down stairs, and when the wagon must be got ready, and when the good-by must be said.

Almost everybody was there to say good-by. But Ruth did not come, nor did Ben Eastman, nor Sue, though she would have liked to. And the old man could not help noticing that Ruth was not there.

"Where's Ruth Stratton?" he asked Reuben.

"She won't be here, father," answered Reuben, so brokenly that the old man had much ado to keep back the tears that were so very near the surface.

"Didn't want to say good-by, I guess," said Aunt Tilda. "Wa-al, I don't wonder. Cyrus, yeou're steppin on my posy bed."

Old Cy Prime had been one of the first of the visitors, for he considered that, by reason of his long and marked attention to Aunt Tilda, he was almost one of the family; and, besides, he had wished to show Seth Perkins that his devotion was of a superior sort to his.

One of the men was to drive Reuben over to the station. Joshua had proposed doing it, but Reuben had begged him not to, and the old man had readily yielded, for he knew it would only be prolonging the distress of separation.

The buggy drew up at the gate, and Reuben looked at his watch nervously, and said it was time to start. Old Joshua had been moving about uneasily and aimlessly, hovering around his boy, as if he would like to take hold of him and prevent his going, and now he smiled spasmodically, and looked at Reuben.

"Good-by, father," said Reuben, in a low tone.

The old man took the outstretched hand in one and then in both of his, shook it once and again, and tried to speak; but something rose in his throat which choked his utterance. He tried to smile, tried to say the cheerful words he had carefully selected for this moment, but all he could do was to look at his boy as if he were seeing him for the last time. Then big tears forced their way out of his dear, kind eyes, and, with one last convulsive shake of the hand, he turned and ran into the house, the tears that streamed down his honest old face more eloquent than any words could have been.

Everybody was much affected by the old man's emotion. The men turned away, Reuben had much ado to keep from breaking down, and Cy Prime fairly whimpered. Aunt Tilda made no attempt whatever, now, to conceal her tears, but let them flow unrestrained, seemingly unaware of them, for she approached Reuben, with his valise in her hand, saying simply:

"Here's your valise, Rube. Yeou'll find everything there. Yeour—yeour stockings—all darned, ev'ry one on 'em—are in the right-hand end of the lower side, jest underneath the han'kerchiefs—han'kerchiefs all marked with yeour name. An' Rube, yeou'll find some nut cakes right on top. An' I put some o' Elder Bole's salve for chapped

hands daown near the bottom. Don't forgit it, Rube, will yeou? An', Rube," she sobbed, giving him the valise, and stroking his hand as if he were still the little boy she had cared for, "I put yeour mother's Testament where yeou'll be sure to see it first thing."

"Thank you, Aunt Tilda."

"An', Rube," said old Cy, taking him by the hand, and whispering tremulously in his ear, "if yeou git hard up an' want any money, let me know. I've got a hundred dollars in the bank, I've saved up, an' yeou kin have it—ev'ry darn cent."

The men all shook hands with Reuben, and he jumped into the buggy, and with a wave of the hand was driven away from the homestead—the old homestead where he had been so happy.

A few days before he might have been able to leave it with no very sore heart, but now he felt that in leaving it he was in truth leaving all his happiness behind him; for now it meant not only home, but Ruth.

He leaned back in the carriage, and, man though he was, could have cried with grief as he thought of his wrecked happiness. He had hoped to the very last moment that Ruth would find some pretext for coming over to the farm: but she had not come, and he was broken-hearted.

As he passed the Eastman farm, Sue was standing by the gate and waved a smiling good-by to him, and he felt at that moment as if she was the one true heart in Swanzey. He smiled back as well as he could, and then gave himself up to moody thought.

At Keene he mailed the letter he had written to Ruth, and as it dropped into the box he felt as if he had torn his heart out of his bosom and cast it from him.

When the train steamed away from the station he felt as if it was carrying him to his doom, instead of to the El Dorado he had pictured but a few days before. But he would not have remained in Swanzey, now, for a king's ransom.

And this was the going away.

CHAPTER XIII.

ONE YEAR LATER.

A year had rolled by since Reuben bade farewell to Swanzezy, and to the casual observer there has been no change in the place or its people. It would seem almost as if there had been no lapse of time, so nearly do the aspect of the country and the occupation of the people coincide with what they were a year ago.

At the Stratton house there are the same signs of busy life that were there a year ago, and nothing outward advertises that the roof covers an aching heart. A stranger might look at Ruth and say, as he would have said a year ago, "What a sweet face!" And only the sisters who are hourly with her know the sadness that has become a part of her life.

At the Eastman house no one could guess that the imperious demeanor of the queenly country girl covered a gnawing, bitter impatience which was but shadowed a year ago; or that the sedate cheerfulness of the stalwart man pitching hay in the field was but a cloak to hide a patient, hopeless longing.

And at the old homestead of the Whitcombs one might well fancy the spent year but a dream, for there in the hay-field is Uncle Joshua, hale and hearty as then, and as full of his quaint humor as he urges the men to hurry with the haying, lest a shower should come up to spoil his best piece. Only perhaps it is because there is no Reuben to come from Keene to help him that the shadow of a hidden sorrow passes now and again over his face.

And at the house Aunt Tilda presides in the kitchen with the same homely, kindly air she wore the day Ruth went in to help her with supper. Those might even be the same potatoes to slice for frying that Ruth helped with that happy night. The good lady is in a little more bustle than then, perhaps, for there are visitors to-night from New York, and who can tell what hopes flash through her mind as she works so briskly, keeping Maggie O'Flaherty, the

hired girl, and Ricketty Ann, the poor-house waif, in a constant state of nervous unrest.

For five months nothing has been heard of Reuben, and the growing sorrow and uneasiness of the days that made those five months, only a parent's or a lover's heart can know. And now that Henry Hopkins' son and daughter, with two of their friends, have unexpectedly come from New York, Aunt Tilda is nearly beside herself to question them about her boy, but she will not until Joshua has come in from the hay-field, and that is why she gives Mrs. O'Flaherty so many distracting orders, and why she sent Bennett's boy to the hay-field with such an incoherent message, that all Joshua can make from it is that Henry Hopkins' boy is at the house.

The advent of their visitors, with their gay lawn-tennis costumes, has supplied the one element of difference between to-day and a year ago. They are not troubled with any sorrows; anybody could know that. Why, they had not been at the house for ten minutes before they had chosen a suitable spot, and there put up the tennis net, to the open-eyed astonishment of Ricketty Ann, who further watched them play their strange game with as much curiosity as if they had been Zulus performing a war-dance at a visiting circus.

She warned them that they would have to pay for any windows they broke, and they laughed at her, while Aunt Tilda, who heard her, admonished her not to be "sassy," though the good lady, being impatient herself, could hardly comprehend the enjoyment the grown men and women could take in the simple game. But presently her impatience had a relief, for there was Joshua coming with the last load of hay, the sleek oxen drawing it as if they knew they would soon be before the fodder-box.

Uncle Joshua had no eye for anybody until the load was safely in the barn; then he gave orders to have the oxen taken out, while the hay was to be left till morning to be taken off. The oxen and hay off his mind, he turned to his visitors, and, as Frank Hopkins stepped forward, greeted him with his hearty smile and outstretched hand, saying:

"I want t' know! Yeou Henry Hopkins' boy?" Then turning to Aunt Tilda, "Looks a leetle mite like Henry used to, only his hair ain't so red."

Then the sister was presented, and Aunt Tilda opined that she favored the Richardsons. And then the friends were introduced to Joshua, Frank Hopkins explaining that he had ventured to bring his friends, as they were all on their way to the White Mountains together.

They need have no fear of their welcome, even if they had not come from the city where his boy had been lost to him, though that had been almost the first thought that had entered his head on hearing who was at the house. He interrupted Frank's apology to say, heartily:

"I guess we can stow 'em away som'eres. Now I want to call yeou all to order on one p'int. I want yeou to call me uncle and Matildy aunt, an' we'll get along."

Probably it struck the city visitors at once that nothing could be more natural than such an arrangement, and they might have said as much had not Mrs. O'Flaherty created a diversion by coming to the door and inquiring of Aunt Tilda whether the potatoes were to be "b'led with their jackets on" or otherwise. Aunt Tilda was disturbed, as housekeepers will be by such trifles, but Uncle Joshua only laughed, and after taking a comprehensive view of his visitors, exclaimed:

"Hi Gun! Ye're all dressed up like a circus! Them clothes is too slick to hay in. Ye'll have to put on yeour old clothes in the morning."

"Oh," said Frank, laughing, "we're going fishing in the morning."

"Want to know! I see yeour net over there on the grass. What d'ye expect to ketch in a scoop like that?" pointing to the tennis racket in his hand.

Frank was proceeding to explain the meaning of the net and the rackets, when Ricketty Ann came running into the yard, breathlessly declaring that she had just seen the "awfulest-lookin' tramp" dodging around outside, thereby causing the city young ladies to scream sympathetically and run into the house, with Mr. Freeman laughingly following them, leaving Uncle Joshua alone with Frank Hopkins.

"Want to scare everybody to death?" demanded Uncle Joshua of Ricketty Ann. "Go fetch me a towel, and I'll wash up out here."

Ricketty Ann did as bidden, and the old man scrubbed himself clean, talking to Frank of his father, and how they had gone to the district school together, and of many other

things but the one nearest his heart, which was his boy Reuben.

He knew, though he had never been there, that New York was so big a place that persons might live there all their lives and never come in contact, and he did not like to ask outright if the young man had seen his boy; but after a while he brought the conversation around to Reuben, and elicited the question whether or not he had a son in the city.

The question proved that young Hopkins knew nothing of Reuben; but the old man could not accept that as final, and so told Frank the story of Reuben's arrest and subsequent departure for New York, thinking the story might lead to some clew; but it did not, and the old man turned wearily away, lest his visitor might see the disappointment on his face.

"I'm going to New York to hunt him up," he said.

"Why not go with us?" asked Frank.

"Gosh! I will, if my boots are done in time," answered Uncle Josh, gratefully.

"I'll do everything I can to help you find your son," said Frank, touched by the distress which was altogether too apparent to be overlooked.

"Thank ye," said the old man, simply. "Say, do yeou believe in dreams?"

Frank laughed merrily.

"Laugh; I don't blame ye a mite," said the old man, in his simple, honest way. "I would if I was you; but I've had them about my boy, so natural, seems as if they must be true. I'm 'fraid he's fallen into bad company. Ye see I ain't heard from him in five months, and his last letter was a leetle mite discouraged."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry, Uncle Josh. That's what makes you have such dreams. You come to New York and we'll help you find your son."

"Thank ye."

And the old man, in answer to a summons from Aunt Tilda to come in and cut some dried beef, left his visitor to have an interesting conversation with Ricketty Ann on the subject of poor houses and their peculiar customs, matters which were of grave interest to her.

"Say," she asked, with a directness partly of youth and

partly of the society to which she had been accustomed,
"who be yeou anyway?"

"I'm Frank Hopkins, of New York."

"I—I didn't know yeou was comin'."

"No? Then there must be something wrong about it."

"I don't know. I guess not. Say, yeou're awful nice-looking."

"Thank you."

"Yes, yeou be. Say, do yeou know, I kin climb a tree just as good as a boy; want to see me?"

"No," cried young Mr. Hopkins, in some alarm, lest she should actually do it. "But tell me who you are?"

"Oh, I ain't very bright, folks say. My name's Mary Ann Maynard, but folks call me Ricketty Ann."

"What for?"

"Oh, I don't know. Cause I had the rickets when I was young, I guess. Say, yeou never lived in the poor-house, did yeou?"

"A Hopkins in the poor-house!"

Frank's face was answer enough, and the confiding Ricketty Ann went on:

"Well, yeou wouldn't like it. They don't give yeou half enough to eat, 'cept on prize days."

"And what do they give you on prize days?"

"Well, on prize days, the one that eats the most puddin' an' milk gets a piece o' punkin pie; an' the last prize day I eat the most puddin' an' milk——"

"And you got the pumpkin pie?"

"No-o. Ate so much puddin' an' milk, couldn't eat no pie. There comes the cows; I must drive them into the barn-yard."

And this engaging product of the poor-house ran off, leaving Frank a new resource against *ennui* in the appearance of Maggie O'Flaherty, who was going to her milking with a song and a shuffling step which would have given her a national reputation if executed with the same *abandon* and *verve* on the stage of a metropolitan theater.

But from the contemplation and approval of this, Frank was summarily dragged away by the peremptory summons of his sister, who not only disapproved of flirting with the hired help, but, moreover, wished the tray of her trunk lifted out.

"All right, Annie," said he; "but the next time I come to the country, I come alone."

He disappeared into the house; and Aunt Tilda, having heard from Joshua that their visitors could give them no news of Reuben, came out into the quiet garden to think of her absent boy, and incidentally to look over a dish of raspberries for supper; for it was, from habit, easier for the dear old lady to think when her hands were occupied with some useful work. Idleness had never made any part of her life.

She was not destined to have much time for unhappy thoughts, however; for, as if to make complete the picture of a year ago, old Cy Prime, having heard that there were visitors at the homestead, had made it the excuse to carry there a small pailful of raspberries which he had picked. He had more than visitors or raspberries on his mind, however. He had not been at the homestead for an unusually long time, and his visit now was fraught with momentous things for him.

During the period of his prolonged courtship of the good spinster—a period now covering more than a quarter of a century—he had had periodical fits of determination to tell his love, and this time he had written out and committed to memory a little speech of declaration, which, to use his own expression, he was determined to deliver if it "bust his galluses." Whether or not Aunt Tilda was aware of these attacks of old Cyrus, may not be said. Certainly she never helped him along in his wooing.

"Ah, Tildy," said Cyrus, by way of announcing himself.

"Why, Cyrus, how be ye? Take a cheer and set daown."

"Thank yeou. I brought over a leetle mess o' raspberries. I met Doctor Baxter daoun the road, an' he said ye had visitors, an' I thought they might come in handy."

"So they will, Cyrus. Had some, but was a little mite afraid they wouldn't go raound. Been hot, ain't it?"

"Hot! I should say it had—hotter'n mustard. Puts me in mind of a day, 'bout sixteen year ago, when the mercury riz so high it knocked the roof clean off'n the thermometer daoun to the store."

"Sho!" and Aunt Tilda laughed in a good-natured, indulgent fashion.

"Yes, it did," declared Cyrus; "an' I could prove it if old Bill Jones was alive."

"Oh, I guess it wa'n't as bad as that," said Aunt Tilda, in the same indulgent tone.

"Wa-al, I don't know. That's what they said; but folks lies so much nowadays, ye can't believe more'n half ye hear."

Aunt Tilda said nothing to this, and the old man began to grow nervous at the thought of the task he had set himself. He talked of the flowers, and he talked of the cucumbers and tomatoes, a number of each of which vegetables were lying on a box. And probably he would have talked of everything there was in sight had not Aunt Tilda brought him to a sense of his extremity by asking him again to sit down.

He drew up a chair to her side, wondering as he did so, how "in Sam Hill" his speech began; for, as usual, it happened that his carefully learned speech all abandoned him at the critical moment.

However, he nerved himself up to the ordeal, and began, stammeringly, when she turned her spectacled eyes on him, and said, coolly:

"Wa-al, Cyrus?"

Cyrus turned away, with a groan, feeling that it would be impossible for him ever to do it. But in a moment he took heart of grace, and his speech coming to him in the very nick of time, he plunged into it, and might have gone through to the end, if the Ganzey boy, practicing his very shrillest whistle, had not crossed the lawn from the barn, and thoroughly distracted his attention.

Then he gave himself a breathing space by talking of the Ganzey boy, and his laziness, and voracity, and dreadful propensity for whistling, until he had warmed up his courage again, when he plunged in where he had left off, only to be almost immediately disturbed by that same shrill whistler.

After another short dissertation, he once more resumed his subject, and this time went on to the end, which was an outright offer of marriage; but unfortunately he had, in his nervousness, taken off his glasses to rub them, and had not noticed that Aunt Tilda had gone silently into the house, in response to a whispered tale from Ricketty Ann that Mrs. O'Flaherty had left the cake in the oven when she had gone out to milk, and that, in consequence, the aforesaid cake was burned black.

When he turned to see how Miss Matilda had taken his

proposal, he discovered how he had wasted his first proposal on the desert air, and he was at once frightened and relieved. Relieved that she had not heard him, and frightened that he must go all over it again—for of that he was now determined.

So, when she came out again, full of woe over the disaster in the kitchen, he listened, and comforted her as well as he could, and then started it once more.

It seemed this time that he would certainly get through; but the fates were against him, and at the critical point Ricketty Ann broke in upon his harangue with the cry that supper was ready.

And Aunt Tilda, whether designedly or not cannot be said, rose from her chair and went into the house. Cyrus did obtain some satisfaction from pelting the Ganzey boy with cucumbers as he came whistling to the well to draw some water; but, after all, he was no nearer to knowing whether Aunt Tilda loved him than he had been any time these thirty years.

CHAPTER XIV.

"HAPPY JACK."

When Ricketty Ann had declared that she had seen the "awfullest" looking tramp lurking about the premises, she had not been far wrong so far as outward appearances were concerned.

A man, or it might be better to say the semblance of a man, had limped along the dusty road, utterly tired out, as any one could see who watched him, and at the moment Ricketty Ann saw him he was trying to find a comfortable place behind a hay-stack to rest himself.

He meditated a visit to the house, but his tired limbs moved him to defer it for a while, and, moreover his experience had taught him not to urge his presence on hungry people.

He was possibly a picturesque object as he lay there on some loose hay, but he certainly was not attractive from any point of view. His hat was a battered, misshapen apology for a head-covering, though perhaps that did not matter, since his hair was matted in an unkempt mass on the top of his head, and was as likely to keep the sun from his skull

as the crown of a hat; his feet were partly covered by boots which were boots only by courtesy, since they bore the semblance of those useful articles without fulfilling any of their duties; the nether garments were a practical illustration of the uncertainty of life and the tenure of high position; heat, perhaps, or it might well be some sterner cause, had limited the upper garments to one coat, and that near what is commonly known as a duster.

Nothing on the man or of the man was clean, and he was, in plain words, a repulsive object. His face was bloated and covered with grime, and with a beard of a week's growth; yet there was something in the manner and look of the man which made one wonder instinctively if he had always been as low in the social scale as now. No one, however, would be likely to speculate on the possibility of his ever being anything else than what he was, for every line of his face, every crease of his dirty garments, every fold of his battered hat, indicated that he was a tramp by choice.

He lay where he was until dusk began to come on, seemingly loth to move even for the food he was so much in need of; but at last he summoned his lazy resolution, and, with a groan for every movement, rose stiffly to his feet and limped toward the house, breaking into a popular song about "White Wings" as he went.

He was much too intent on himself and his errand to see that his noise had disturbed another prowler, and he limped along with an incredibly jaunty air to where Ricketty Ann and the Ganzey boy were leaning in confidential communication over the gate bars, listening to the song, perhaps, but unconscious of the singer until he was almost upon them, terrifying in his very wretchedness.

Then they set up a terrific outcry and fled for the house, very much to the amusement of the tramp, who could not have been more delighted had he received a warm welcome.

In the meantime the other person, who may fitly be called a prowler, since she—for it was a woman—was approaching the house with a sort of stealth, took advantage of the commotion caused by the tramp to steal into the barn at the lower side, and there, under cover of the load of hay, stop as if uncertain what to do.

The tramp, however, was troubled by no sort of uncertainty, for he called after Ricketty Ann:

"One moment, my pretty gazelle!" and the manner of speaking as much as the character of the words gave the man an air of grotesque and exaggerated gayety.

Ricketty Ann turned back to the threshold of the door, reassured, perhaps, by the tone and words.

"I would banquet, fair maid," laughed the fellow, airily.

"Wa-at?" demanded the product of the poor-house, to whom such language was as Greek.

"I am a prestidigitateur," retorted the man in the same tone, which would have been called badinage in a drawing-room, but which sounded strangely in that place and from such a one. "I make things disappear. I take two slices of bread thusly. Put them together so"—showing in pantomime—"Hi! Presto! Begone!" and he made a gesture of disappearance, which smacked strongly of the variety stage.

"Huh! Anybody could do that," said Ricketty Ann, scornfully, imitating the gesture.

She had come out of the house in her interest in the man's actions, and he laughed heartily at her failure to grasp the meaning of his words.

"In plain words, then," he said, "I would eat, *mon ami*."

"No, you won't eat me, nuther," cried Ricketty Ann, alarmed at the words whose meaning she misconstrued, and running into the house.

"Come back here, come back here!" he laughed, and, as she turned around, "don't light a fire for me; I'm not particular; plain bread and butter will do—I don't care for turkey."

"Well you won't get nuthin' here," cried Ricketty Ann, disappearing into the house to call Uncle Joshua.

"No?" laughed the fellow, whose mirth seemed inexhaustible; "then I'll score my first failure. Happy, old boy," he exclaimed, slapping his chest, "how's your high C?" and forthwith he rang up the scale in a way that showed training, but ending in a break that proved the vocal chords to be out of order.

He seemed quite well satisfied with the result, however, for he pronounced the effort good, and, with a singular air of overdone gentility, as if it were assumed for a jest, he approached the door of the house, and sang:

✓ "Nobody's darling am—I."

He got no further, for at this point old Joshua appeared at the door, and with that quaint mixture of simplicity and humor for which he was famous, interrupted him with:

"I can't help that."

The fellow evidently had a keen sense of the ridiculous, for at the old man's sally he bent nearly double with unrestrained laughter. Then he retired a few paces, and, still laughing, said:

"Perhaps you would like something different," and immediately commenced that favorite of the variety stage:

"I've fifteen dollars in my inside pocket."

accompanying the words with as much of a dance as his stiff limbs and sore feet would permit.

"Tut, tut, tut, tut!" cried Joshua, lifting his hand, rebukingly. "Don't want none o' that here. Got visitors." Then, as the man stopped and laughed, he demanded:

"Who be yeou?"

"A man without a home; poor, but a gentleman still," and he politely lifted his hat.

"Sho! I want t'know!" exclaimed Joshua. "I guess ye u're a tramp, ain't ye?"

"Vulgarly speaking, yes; properly, no."

"What be ye, then?"

"A natural result."

"O' what?"

"Drink."

Old Joshua eyed him for a moment, comprehensively, and then said, emphatically:

"Hi gun! Ye look like it. Yeou seem to be pretty sober now."

"Yes, but it's a dead case of force, though, I assure you."

"Look here, young man, there's one thing in yeour favor."

"What's that?"

"Ye ain't afraid to tell the truth."

"Thank you," and the fellow lifted his hat and bowed with that same air of exaggerated formality, which seemed to afford him a secret pleasure.

"Perlite as a pair o' sugar tongs," said Joshua, turning to Ricketty Ann, who stood watching them. Then to the man:

"How did yeou get here?"

"Came in on the hot wave."

Joshua turned to Ricketty Ann with an appreciative twinkle in his eye, and said to her:

"There's somethin' I like about this feller. I'll have a talk with him. If there's any good in him I'll find that out. purty quick. Young man, take a cheer an' set daown."

The tramp walked over to the well to get an old chair there, and the sight of the water seemed to make him thirsty, for he asked if he might have a drink.

"Pitch in an' take all ye want," said the old man.

The man took the tin dipper from its nail, and dipping up some water was about to drink, when he suddenly remembered the courtesies of the case, and said, politely:

"Old gentleman!"

"Wa-al?"

"Won't you join me?"

"Out o' my own well, too," murmured the old man, as he waved a refusal. Then as he saw the man take a drink and make a wry face, he asked, "What's the matter. Yeou don't like it."

"Well, it does taste kind o' weak." And throwing the rest of the water away, he hung the dipper in its place and drew his chair up near to the old man.

"Are yeou hungry?" demanded Joshua.

"Well," answered the fellow, pursing up his lips thoughtfully, "I could manage to eat a tart if it was not too large."

"Well, if that ain't cheek!" exclaimed Ricketty Ann. "I guess I'd better go shut the hens up," and she started to do so, when the old man called out to her:

"Here, Rick, come here. Go tell Aunt Tildy to cut two slices of bread and butter, and bring 'em out here."

"Skip," said the fellow, and Ricketty Ann disappeared into the house.

As she did so, the man broke into such a dreadful cough that old Joshua started back in dismay.

"I guess yeou've got a cold?" he said.

The man laughed at that as he laughed at everything, and answered, lightly:

"Yes, I must have left the bars down last night."

"Where did yeou sleep?"

"At Widow Green's."

"Widder Green? I don't know no Widder Green around here."

"Why, my dear old unsophisticated——" began the man, when Joshua interrupted him, reprovingly:

"There, there, that'll do. Don't want none o' that."

"We knights of the road," went on the laughing tramp, "call a hay-field Widow Green. I must have crept in the north side of a stack last night. I say, old gentleman, you haven't such a thing as a cigarette about you, have you?"

"No, sir; I don't smoke."

"Quite right," said the tramp, in a highly moral tone, but with the air of talking for his own amusement. "It's a pernicious habit, anyway. I don't often indulge in it myself."

"Why don't yeou carry a pipe?"

"No," said the fellow, with his inimitable air; "it makes your clothes smell."

"I guess yeou're a kind of a comic, ain't ye?" said Joshua, laughing at the conceit.

"Oh, well, there's no use crying over spilt milk, and so I use a little philosophy now and then."

"Philosophy is very well in sunshine, but I sh'd think you'd want suthin' a little mite more substantial in rough weather. I sometimes wonder how you fellers get along—what you think on, if you ever do think, an' what yeour aim in life is."

"Oh, I jog along, and take my chance with the rest; grab on where I can; often drunk and seldom sober. When I choose I take my booze; I'm Happy Jack, the Rover."

"Well, yeou're a good hand to speak a piece, ain't ye? I guess yeou're a good deal like a singed cat—ye feel better'n ye look."

"That's a good 'un, old man!" cried Jack, doubling up with appreciative mirth.

"What's you name?" demanded Joshua.

"Jack."

"Jack what?"

"Happy Jack."

"Hi, gun," cried the old man; "but it fits ye! Where d'yeou come from?"

"Nowhere."

"Sho! I wan't t' know! Where d'yeou live?"

"Everywhere. I'm the star truck-rider of the world," and Happy Jack rose from his seat and lifted his hat theatrically.

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"That I travel all over the country without paying a cent."

"What on?"

"On the cars."

"Why don't they put ye off?"

"Don't see me."

"Why not?"

"Because I ride underneath, on the trucks. Oh, I don't ride on common passenger cars. I won't take a train unless it has a sleeper."

"Sho! Why?"

"Oh, the trucks are wider, and don't come so near a fellow's head."

"Gosh! I sh'd think it was a purty resky business."

"So it is. Not a day passes that some poor fellow isn't either maimed or killed." A sudden seriousness came over the fellow's careless, laughing mood, and his voice trembled a little. Only last week I was riding under a sleeper, with my partner, and rounding a curve, his head was caught between the braces and crushed. I rode for thirty miles listening to his pitiful cries, and unable to help him. He spoke to me. Said he, 'Jack, old pard, I'm called in. You'll have to get another pal,' and with that he breathed his last. A higher power had put on the brakes."

The man's voice had sunk lower and lower, and at last his emotion overcame him altogether and he sobbed outright, burying his face in his grimy handkerchief, careless of what his auditor might think. But the old man's tears were falling with his own.

And so Aunt Tilda found them when she came out to give Joshua the bread and butter which she had cut and spread with a liberal hand. Joshua took it from her, and silently handed it to the other.

"Thank you," said Jack. "I won't eat this now."

And he put it in his pocket; for the thought of the terrible fate of his partner had robbed even his hunger of its pangs.

For some moments the two men, so dissimilar, sat in sympathetic silence. Then old Joshua broke the silence by asking:

"Have you any parents living?"

"Yes. One."

"Father or mother?"

"Mother."

"Where does she live?"

"In New York."

"Poor?"

"No. Rich."

"Why don't you go home?"

The tramp turned suddenly and looked at Joshua for some seconds. Then he asked:

"Have you any sons?"

"Yes; one."

"Where?"

"In New York. Was the last time I heard on him."

"Why doesn't he come home?"

"Now, by gosh! yeou've got me," answered Josh, with characteristic honesty.

The tramp seemed hardly to have heard him. He studied the grass at his feet for a moment, and then said, brokenly:

"I'll tell you why I don't go home. It's because I'm no good. A wreck at thirty. Look fifty, don't I?"

"Pretty near."

"I left home because I couldn't have my own way."

"Well," said Joshua, looking him over, "you look as if you'd had it lately."

The man started, but said nothing; and Joshua, with a kindly ring in his voice, went on:

"Do yeou ever think of what yeou owe that mother o' yourn? How she watched over yeou and prayed for yeou? Have yeou forgotten that?"

"Look here, old gentleman," said the tramp, slowly, "you've set me thinking."

"I'm glad on it if I have. See here, young man, will yeou go home if I give yeou the money?"

"Yes."

"And stop drinking?"

The eager expression which for an instant had lighted up the man's face faded away, and with a faint shadow of his old humor he heaved a sigh and exclaimed:

"I say, old gentleman, that's a corker!"

"Will ye try?" insisted Joshua, separating a bill from a roll.

"Yes, I'll try."

"Well, here's a five-dollar bill. Take a train to New Haven, and the boat home, and you'll be there by mornin'."

The tramp rose slowly and examined the bill as he stretched his stiff limbs.

"It 'ud been more in my way if you'd set the dog on me," he said, as if not able to comprehend the meaning of so much generosity.

"Yes, I s'pose so," sighed Joshua.

The man still stood there, without moving, contemplating the bill in his hand, and evidently turning the matter over in his mind, for he muttered to himself:

"Go home? Yes. "Stop drinking? No." He turned to Joshua and held out the bill, saying, "Look here, old friend, you'd better take this money back; I don't honestly believe I can do as I've agreed."

"Yeou can try, can't yeou?" asked Joshua, getting up from his chair and going over to him in a kindly way.

"Yes, I can try."

"That's right. Go home and be somebody. 'Tain't too late yet," and he patted the poor fellow on the shoulder as if he had been his own son.

The man was greatly moved, and took Uncle Joshua's hand in his, saying, with a determination which completely transformed him:

"I will try, and if I don't succeed, I'll give old John Barleycorn the toughest scuffle he ever had for the under hold."

They shook hands once more, and then the tramp limped off, Uncle Joshua looking after him, and saying to himself:

"Mebbe I've done a foolish thing; but I don't believe it. A man who can express so much feelin' for another must have some good in him. Besides, I've got a boy away from home to-night; perhaps he's in trouble. If he is, I hope some kind hand will be stretched out to help him."

CHAPTER XV.

HAPPY JACK'S COMMISSION.

All this while the woman, crouching behind the load of hay, had listened to what was being said without making her presence known. For most of the time she listened

listlessly; but when Joshua spoke of Reuben, and expressed his ignorance of his whereabouts, she listened intently, and drooped her head with disappointment, muttering:

"Then the visitors haven't heard anything of Rube?"

She moved then as if to go away, but stopped at the prompting of some thought, and waited silently until Uncle Josh had dismissed the tramp and had moved over so near the house that she was safe to leave her hiding-place by the back entrance.

It was quite dark now, but she could distinguish the form of the tramp limping along the road that led to Keene. She let him go some rods, keeping at an even distance from him all the time, but after a while quickened her own pace, and overtook him in a short time, for his walk was a slow one.

"Stop a minute," she said, in a quick, imperious way. "I want to speak with you."

He stopped and looked at her. He saw that she was young, pretty, and of a lofty manner, and he took off his hat, saying in his mock deferential fashion:

"What will my Lady Macbeth of her servant?"

"Don't play the fool with me! I want you to do something for me. Do yeou want to earn some money?"

She spoke more impatiently than angrily, but he would probably not have lost his temper in any case.

"Well," he answered, in his airy way, "I am not on very good terms with work; but if what you ask is not too hard, I may, just for a change, take a try at it. What must I do?"

"You are a tramp?"

"I have been called so; but if what you want done is contingent on my remaining a tramp, it were well 'twere quickly done, or words to that effect."

"Don't joke with me."

"Well, I don't feel as much like joking as I did a while ago; so, perhaps, I can suit you if you will only hurry up with your story. What do you want me to do?"

"Yeou live in New York."

"Quite right, though how you discovered that fact, unless the natural grace of my manner betrayed my city training, I don't see."

"And yeou are going back to New York."

"Right again, unless my resolution gives out, and I don't think it will."

"Will yeou do something for me there, if I pay yeou for it?"

"What can you want done that you should ask me to do it?"

"Will you do it?" she demanded, impatiently.

"Depends upon what it is. Tell me. Oh, I see you are afraid to trust me? I'd like to know why you picked me out of all the world to give a commission to."

He looked at her inquiringly, and his manner was more earnest, as if he doubted the propriety of taking a commission from a pretty, young country girl, who approached him in such a mysterious manner. She seemed to comprehend his thoughts, for after a moment of hesitation, she abruptly said:

"Yeou promised Uncle Josh that you'd go home and reform. Are yeou going to do it?"

"So that's the old gentleman's name, is it? Your uncle, is he?"

"No; everybody calls him uncle. His name is Joshua Whitcomb. Are yeou going to do as you promised?"

"If the strength is in me," answered the tramp, quietly.

"I suppose yeou are grateful to him, for what he did for yeou?"

"I don't know what you're driving at; but I'm grateful, yes."

"And would you like to do something for him?"

"Oho! I think I see what you are getting at now. His son, eh?"

"Yes, his son. Will yeou try to find him in New York?"

"Find a needle in a haystack! My poor girl, don't you know that I might hunt for ten years and never find him?"

"But if I could give yeou a clew?"

"What sort of a clew? See here, young woman, you may count on me to do anything in my power to find that boy; for unless my feelings deceive me mightily, I shall owe more than I can ever repay to that old man yonder. Tell me all you know about him. To begin with, what is he to you?"

The girl hesitated for a moment, as if struggling inwardly; then she said in a low tone, almost in a whisper, indeed:

"He is to be my husband."

A look of compassion passed over the man's face, and he muttered:

"Poor girl!" Then aloud, "Don't be afraid to trust me. I am a tramp, you see; but, after all, I was a gentleman once, and I feel something of the old spirit animating me now. Put aside my gratitude for the old man, and I would still help you if possible. Tell me all about the boy. What is his name?"

"Reuben Whitcomb."

"Reuben Whitcomb. I won't forget it. Now, go on."

"He went away from here about a year ago. Until five months ago he wrote regularly to—to—us. Then he stopped writing to everybody but—but—me. He wrote to me under promise to keep it secret; but a month afterward he suddenly stopped writing even to me, and nothing has been heard of him since."

Happy Jack looked around for a place to sit upon, and sank on a big stone, saying:

"Excuse me if I sit down, but I'm tired. Heard nothing of him since, eh? Why did you ask me to look him up? You had a reason; tell me honestly what it was."

"I thought——"

She stopped.

"Don't be afraid to say it."

"I was afraid he might have taken to drinking, and then——"

"Exactly. I thought that was it. And you thought I would know just where to look for a young man who was out of luck and had taken to drink to drown his wretchedness. Perhaps you are right. What was his last address?"

"No. — Bowery."

"No. — Bowery? Umph! A fifteen-cent lodging-house! Poor fellow! And is that all you can tell me? Remember, I ought to know everything to be of the most service to you."

"There's nothing more to tell yeou, except that I wrote to the landlord of the hotel where Rube stopped, and he answered that he didn't know nothin' about him."

"And how long ago since you heard from him?"

"Four months next Wednesday."

"Had he said anything to make you think he would be likely to take to drink?"

"He was daown-hearted and couldn't get work to do, and his money was all gone, and he said he didn't blame a man who got comfort in liquor when he couldn't get it nowhere else. Oh, do yeou think yeou can find him?"

"Well, it won't be easy, but I'll try. If I should find him shall I send word to Joshua Whitcomb, Keen?"

"No. Send it to me here."

Happy Jack smiled.

"But I don't know your name, and I don't know where 'here' is."

"Susan Eastman, Swanzey."

"Susan Eastman? I may forget that. Have you a pencil and a piece of paper with you?"

"No, but I can give you an envelope with the direction on."

"From him?"

"Yes."

"That will do. Give it to me. Has it the address of the lodging-house—the hotel I mean—on it?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me. His name is Reuben Whitcomb, and all the rest is here." He put the envelope, which she had given him, reluctantly, into his trousers pocket. "You may depend on me to find him if I can; and I will not give up easily. It would do me more good to find that old man's son, and give him a lift, than anything else that could happen to me."

"And yeou will be sure to write only to me?"

"I suppose so; yes. Why not write to the old man?"

"No, no. And yeou must never let any one know that I spoke to yeou about Rube, will yeou?"

"No, if you say not," answered Jack, seeming to see why she asked him to keep her secret. Nothing was more natural than that the girl who loved a worthless fellow should be unwilling to let the world know that she sought him after he had ceased to write to her. "I'll write only to you, and I'll not betray you even to him, if I find him."

"Thank yeou. Do yeou want some money now?"

"No, I thank you. I have enough to get home with, and that will do me, for they will kill the fatted calf for me when I get home. I couldn't take any money anyhow for doing a kindness for that good old man. Uncle Josh, you call him, eh? Well, God bless Uncle Josh! Good-night,

Miss Susan. If I am going to Keene to-night I'd better be off, for I don't feel in the very best trim, and I fancy it'll take the best part of the night to get there. Good-night. Have a good heart! I'll find him if he's to be found," and off he limped, as cheerily as if he thought nothing of the six miles before him.

"Will you write to me inside of a week, anyhow?"

"Yes. Whether I find him or not."

CHAPTER XVI.

FOR THE SECOND TIME.

How hard a year it had been for Ruth, no one could have guessed. If she had been permitted to hide her sorrow, it would have been easier; but in some way, she never knew how, the story of her quarrel with Reuben had been noised abroad. The cause of the quarrel was never mentioned, however, nor was Ben's name ever connected with the matter.

This was a certain satisfaction to Ruth, and she was careful never to give rise to any suspicion by her conduct toward Ben, whom she always treated with a sisterly kindness, under which only he could detect a peculiar sadness. He knew she acquitted him of any intention to part her from Reuben, but he also could not help feeling that she regarded him as the cause.

It was characteristic of him, however, that he neither blamed her for harboring such a feeling toward him nor tried to justify himself, though he could not help hoping that the time would come when she would voluntarily admit that he had acted with more moderation than any other, not loving her as he did, could have brought himself to do.

At first he had no thought of pushing his own interests in the absence of his rival, believing that to do so would only endanger every chance of retaining the friendship of Ruth; but after Reuben stopped writing to his father, the story became current, and was generally believed, that Reuben had fallen into bad company and was drifting into drunkenness.

Who started such a story no one knew, but the very fact of Reuben not writing to his father gave a tone of probability to it, and it found few to doubt it. Even Ben, who

was generously willing to think as well of his rival as circumstances would permit, was inclined to credit the story.

It gave a new impulse to his hope, but it was some time before he could bring himself to act. His sincere feeling was, that however unworthy he might be of Ruth's love, Reuben, on the other hand, was totally unfitted to make her happy. If he had not believed this he would not have ever again urged his suit. As it was, he considered the matter until he had formed a definite resolution, and, then, went to see Ruth.

It was on a Sunday evening, and about a week after Susan's interview with the tramp, that he went to the squire's house. He knew very well that he should find her alone at that time, for he had learned that all the others of the family would be out.

Ben had never deliberately called upon Ruth since that afternoon when he had had the quarrel with Reuben, and it was somewhat awkward to do so now; the more so that Ruth, who sat in the porch in the gathering twilight, started up at sight of him, and said, coldly:

"Father has gone out."

Ben hesitated a moment, and then answered, with bold frankness:

"I know it, Ruth, and that's why I kem over. I want to see yeou?"

"What about?"

She was still very distant.

"Won't yeou set daown, Ruth?" he asked, pleadingly.

She sat down, but it was in a defiant way, as if she would have him understand that she was constrained to do it by politeness, and not from any desire to hear what he had to say.

"Thank yeou," said Ben. "I know yeou don't want to hear me, Ruth, an' I ain't goin' to say nothin' agen yeour feelin' that way. All I ask is to have yeou hear me aout. Will yeou, Ruth?"

"If you are going to talk about—about——"

"Wa-al, Ruth," interposed Ben, "it is, an' it ain't. I want to say su'thin' about Rube, an' su'thin' about t'other matter, an' I'd like yeou to hear me. Will yeou?"

"I don't see what there is to say, Ben; but if you wish, I will hear you."

"Thank yeou. Wa-al then, 'twas through me that

Rube went away without bein' friends with yeou, wa'n't it?"

"I suppose it was, Ben; but I have never blamed you, or have never meant to, anyhow."

"I know that, Ruth, an' I've been grateful an' have tried to act all the time jest as nat'ral as I could. I don't quite know how to begin, Ruth. I'm sure to say su'thin' yeou won't like."

"Why need you say anything, Ben?"

"I must say it, Ruth. I've kep' quiet as long as I could. Yeou've heard them stories about Rube, haven't yeou?"

"I suppose I know what you mean," she said, with sudden heat. "I don't believe a word of them."

"Wa-al, I don't know," said Ben, slowly.

"Well, I know," broke in Ruth, quickly. "I won't hear a word against Rube. If others will talk, they may; but I should think you would have too much manliness."

Her voice grew tremulous toward the last, and Ben hastened to set himself right.

"If I spoke of it, Ruth, it was not to repeat the stories to yeou as true. Yeou know, if anybody does, that I have always tried to do the right thing by Rube. Even that last time I saw him, I took from him what I wouldn't have taken from anybody else. Yeou ought to remember I was always ready to do him a good turn."

"Forgive me, Ben," she said, gently, "I was wrong; but everybody seems to take so much pleasure in telling me all the unkind things they can about Rube that I was hasty with you. Rube is nothing to me now, but I can't bear to hear him abused."

"I'll never abuse him, Ruth. I don't know anything about the stories; but I have to speak of them, because it's partly on their account that I came here this evenin'. Yeou see, Ruth, there ain't much doubt that Rube's been havin' a hard time in the city. I s'pose his money's giv' aout, an' he won't ask for no more from Uncle Josh. Then I s'pose he's down-hearted, and stops writin'—for he did stop, Ruth; I had it from the old man himself. Wa-al—now I don't mean him no wrong, Ruth—but what is there more nat'ral than for him, alone there, to fall into bad company? Maybe he has taken to drinkin' to pass time. They do say it's all-fired easy to fall inter bad habits in the city."

"Oh, Ben," sobbed Ruth, "I am afraid you may be right. I keep thinking of it all the time. And sometimes I wonder if I ought to do anything to bring him back, if it isn't too late."

And secure in the generosity and greatness of the love which she had not been able to accept, Ruth let her tears flow for the man who had rejected her love.

"Wa-al, Ruth, I haven't got nothin' agen Rube—nothin' at all," said Ben, sturdily; "an' yet the same thoughts will keep a comin' about him. Maybe he is in trouble there, an' maybe he is drinkin'. Wa-al, what is to be done? I might let him go, an' never fret myself about him, but I can't stand seein' yeou so worried. So I've thought about it an' thought about it, an' that's what I've come to see yeou about to-night."

"Oh, Ben! And I was so unkind! How generous you are!"

"Don't praise me too much, Ruth, till yeou've heard all I've got to say. I ain't so all-fired generous after all, though I won't say I wouldn't have done it, anyhow. But it's jest this way, Ruth—I love yeou, and tain't likely I'll ever do anything else. I know yeou love Rube, an' don't love me; but, Ruth, don't yeou know yeou may be lovin' a man that don't love yeou, an' never will as much as yeou ought to be loved?"

"Ben Eastman!"

"Don't say it like that, Ruth. I ain't a-tryin' to say anything agen Rube. I'm only tryin' to be honest. He did go away from yeou, an' leave yeou without a word—naow, didn't he?"

"I don't think we need to talk of that."

"Naow, you're angry with me. But I s'pose it's only nat'ral. Only yeou don't understand what I'm drivin' at, Ruth. It's jest this: Suppose yeou was sure that Rube didn't love yeou, an' wasn't never comin' back to yeou, couldn't yeou learn to love somebody else? Couldn't yeou love me, Ruth? Yeou don't know how sore my heart is for yeou, Ruth. I love yeou that much, Ruth, that I'd do anything to make yeou happy. See, naow, what I am goin' to do; I'm goin' to New York to try to find Rube, an' bring him back to yeou, if he loves yeou."

He stopped and waited for some comment from Ruth, but she only sobbed quietly. He went on:

"I know I'm hurtin' yeou cruelly, Ruth, an' I know it would 'a'been nicer of me to have just gone an' tried to find him, and bring him back to yeou; but I wa'n't big enough for that. I wanted to know if I had any chance for yeour love. But, there! It don't matter, Ruth. I'll go without knowin', if yeou don't want to answer. An', Ruth, I jest want to say that it won't matter whether yeou tell me or not, or whether yeou say yeou kin love or can't. I'll go find him, an' get him back to yeou if I can, jest as honestly as if I didn't love yeou, an' nothin' was dependin' on his lovin' yeou or not. I've been gettin' ready to go to New York all the week, an' I'm ready to go to-morrer. Good-by, Ruth. Yeou'll shake hands, won't yeou? An' I'd like it if yeou could say yeou trusted me to do the right thing."

He held out his hand, and Ruth laid her little hand in it. He held it a moment, and then let it drop.

"Good-by, Ruth."

He turned to go, but she stopped him.

"No, I won't let you go like that, Ben," she said, steadying her voice. "It's only right for you to ask to know. I can see just how generous you are in what you are going to do. It might seem, to one who did not know you, as if you were setting a price on a service; but I know it isn't that."

"No, no, Ruth, it ain't. Thank yeou for sayin' it. I didn't know how."

"I don't love you, Ben, and I do love Rube." She broke down, and sobbed pitifully. "I am sure he does love me, in spite of his cruel silence. I don't know how I can believe anything else. But, Ben, if at any time I should be certain that Rube did not love me, I would try to love you. I couldn't promise any more than that."

"I don't ask any more."

"You will try to find him, won't you, Ben? He won't be so foolish now, I am sure. But don't tell him I sent you—don't say anything about me unless he should ask you. And, Ben, if he should need any money, let him have it, and I'll pay it back to you. I have some. Oh, you don't know how grateful I am to you, Ben! I don't believe many men could be so generous. I couldn't respect or admire any man more than I do you, Ben."

"Thank you. Good-by, Ruth."

Ruth had meant to be very kind, but she had only convinced him that her love for Reuben was so great that she would let nothing stand in the way of a reconciliation short of a loss of her self-respect.

He could not help thinking, with some bitterness, how the love which he would have valued so highly was thrown away on a man who thought so little of it that he took no trouble to preserve it.

However, he had made up his mind to search for Reuben, and find him if he could. It might be that the stories were without foundation, and that he was simply neglectful because of his prosperity; but that seemed hardly likely, and Ben had little doubt that the stories were in some way founded on truth.

He had tried to follow the particular story of his drinking to its source, but had not been successful—each person he spoke to declaring that he had heard it from some other person.

If it should turn out that Reuben had fallen into evil habits, he was determined, if he could find him, to do as much for him as if he were his brother; but it was revolting to his keen sense of right that a man who could act as Reuben had should be rewarded with the love of a woman like Ruth.

He walked home sad enough, determined to keep his word to Ruth to the spirit and letter, and yet ill at ease with himself for having to do it.

He had said nothing to his father or Sue about going to New York, and he decided now that he would not. He would let them think that he was going to Boston. Perhaps he was brought to this decision by some fear of Sue's sarcastic comments, should she know he was going to New York, and suspect, as she certainly would, that he was going to look for Reuben.

Since the departure of Reuben, his relations with Sue had been peculiar. She had invited his confidence, and had constantly urged him to devote himself to Ruth, until about the time when Reuben had ceased to write to his father, when she had suddenly taken it into her head to be angry with him, and since that time had shunned all intercourse with him other than that rendered necessary by being in the same house together.

Ben attached no other importance to this than he had

been accustomed to attach to her freaks before she had so suddenly thrust herself into the place of chief adviser of his love affairs. He had been accustomed to her varying moods since her childhood, and he now merely avoided her as much as he could, without making it apparent to her that he was doing so.

She was never a congenial adviser, and there was a certain sense of relief in feeling that he was no longer bound to tell her the state of his feelings. It was, therefore, with a shade of annoyance that, as he neared the house, he came upon Sue, who was approaching him rapidly, and with an air of disorder, indicating to his experienced eye that she was disturbed about something.

For a moment she did not see him, as was indicated by the start she gave on looking up. In her hand she held something white. In the darkness he could not determine exactly what it was, and, having no curiosity in the matter, did not try to discover, until she showed by a hasty movement that she was desirous of concealing it, when involuntarily he looked more keenly.

It was by the crackling sound, however, rather than by any sense of sight, that he discovered that it was a piece of white paper that she held. He gave the matter no further consideration, and only wondered casually why she should have thrust it into her pocket so hurriedly.

It did flash through his mind that it might be a love-letter; but the thought of love and Sue together seemed almost incongruous enough to laugh at, and he entertained the thought but a moment.

"Out for a walk, Sue?" he ventured to ask, more for the sake of not passing her in what might seem an ugly silence, than for any other reason.

She stopped short, and hesitated a moment, as if undetermined whether to answer or not. Then she spoke, and Ben wondered at the low, uneven tones of her voice.

"Yes, and I'll go back with yeou, if yeou don't care."

"Sartain," answered Ben, with a sinking heart, for he knew from experience that if Sue set out to extract from him what had occurred during the evening, he could not avoid telling her unless he was willing to refuse point-blank to do so.

But Sue was evidently busy with other thoughts, for she

walked by his side in silence for several moments before she spoke, and then it was not of his concerns.

"Ben," she said, slowly, "I've lived with yeour folks a good while, haven't I?"

"Why, yes, Sue—nigh onto seventeen year. Why?"

"Oh, nothin', only I was jest a-thinkin' that I hadn't been so all-fired pleasant all the time that yeou'd care a great deal if I was to leave yeou."

"Why, what d'ye mean, Sue? What yeou talkin' about?"

"Well, suppose I was to die suddenly, yeou wouldn't care much, would yeou?"

"Of course I would; but don't talk like that, Sue. You make me uncomfortable."

"Didn't mean to do that, Ben," she said, slowly, and then added, suddenly: "Look here, Ben, if anything should happen, I'd like yeou to think that I wasn't ungrateful for what yeou and yeour father have done for me. Yeou'll remember that, will yeou, Ben?"

"Yes, I'll remember it, Sue; but what's come over yeou? Ye ain't sick, be yeou?"

"No, I was only thinkin'."

"Somethin's on yeour mind, Sue. Tell me what it is. If yeou're sick, let me go for the doctor."

"I ain't sick, Ben. Just as well as ever I was; but yeou never can tell what will happen, can yeou?"

"No, I s'ppose not," and the kind fellow looked anxiously at her.

Excepting for a nervousness and dejection, neither of which was natural to her, she seemed as well as ever; but she was so markedly different from her usual self-contained, rather cynical self, that he was greatly disturbed. He knew, however, that it would be useless to urge her to an explanation after she had declared that there was nothing the matter, and so he parted from her when they reached the house with a sympathetic

"Good-night, Sue. I hope yeou will feel better in the morning."

"There is nothing the matter, Ben, but don't forget what I said."

She went to her room, while he sought his father to tell him of his projected trip to the city.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LETTER FROM NEW YORK.

When Sue reached her room she sat for some minutes in the dark, looking out of her window at the distant black hills. But there could not be many moments of inaction in a temperament like hers, and of a sudden she sprang up and lighted her lamp.

She drew the curtain of the window so that no one could see her from the outside, and took from her pocket the piece of white paper she had hidden from Ben. She smoothed it out and read it, for it was written on.

"MY DEAR MISS EASTMAN :—I made it my first business, on reaching the city, to look for Reuben Whitcomb. After some difficulty I have found him. He is very ill, and I think his father ought to come to him at once. I could not move him from where he is, but I have him as comfortable as might be; have had a physician to see him, and have hired a woman in the house to nurse him. I think his father ought to come to him, though I do not understand from the physician that he is in any immediate danger, if in danger at all. His address is 33 Oliver street, not the best neighborhood in the city, and I think that when his father comes he had better send me word to meet him at the Grand Central Depot. Don't be alarmed about the young man. He is sick, but not in danger. We will pull him through. Very sincerely yours,

JACK HAZZARD.

"No. — West Fifty-fourth street."

"Sick, but not in danger," muttered Sue, after reading the letter. "Shall I tell the old man? No; I have doneso much now I will go on to the end. He must marry me if I do this for him. No, I will not turn back naow."

She read the letter over twice, and then folded it and put it away in the pocket of her gown, with the air of one who has determined on her course and will pursue it to the end, in spite of qualms of any sort.

She emptied the drawers of her little bureau, took out what clothing she had in her wardrobe, and selected from the pile a small assortment of wearing apparel, which she packed in a small valise, which had probably been bought for the purpose, for it was quite new.

From the bosom of her gown she took a roll of bills, and, selecting a few from it, sewed the remainder in the bosom of a gown lying on the bed. The bills she had taken out she put in an old-fashioned purse which she took from her pocket.

Her preparations were completed now, and there was nothing more to do but wait. Her face was pale but determined as she let herself sink in a heap on the floor, with her head resting on the patch-work quilt of the little bed, on which she had lain every night for nearly seventeen years.

She looked around the little room, and her eyes moistened. In her own way she had been happy there. She might have been happier if she had been willing, but from the first it had been as it was now. She had always been wishing for something different.

Well, she had stifled the desire before and had lived it into another, which, in its turn, had been stifled. This she would see to the end, letting it have its own way. Reuben Whitcomb was the one human being whom she had loved with all the strength of her willful, perverse heart; she had stooped to everything she herself considered contemptible in order to win him, and now she would make the last attempt.

If it failed—if, even now, he should still reject her for the memory of the baby-faced girl over the hill, what would become of her? Well, what did it matter? She would make the attempt, and after that let it come what might.

She changed her clothing for that which she intended to wear, and threw herself on the bed. There she lay in a half-awake, nervous state, hearing each one of the household go to his room, and finally lying there through the hours of still darkness until the little clock on the shelf told her it was one o'clock.

Then she arose and lighted her lamp. By its light she wrote a few words on a sheet of paper, which she fastened in her mirror, as being the most conspicuous place in her room.

"I have gone away," it said. "It will be useless to look for me, for I shall never come back."
Suz.

She took a last look around the room, to be sure that she was leaving nothing she could take, and then took up her valise, and putting out her light, softly went down stairs.

It was not difficult to get out of the house unheard, and it was but a few minutes before she was standing under a silver maple in the front yard, looking up at the house which had sheltered her so many years.

She was not a sentimental girl, but she was imaginative, and at that moment her mind was abnormally active. The future into which she was to plunge seemed to rise up before her and warn her back, ere it was too late, and a shudder of undefined dread ran over her; but she was not to be deterred by any fanciful obstacles, and with the wave of the hand, as if she would toss all specters from her, she turned resolutely away and took the path.

She had never before been on the roads at night so late, and there was something awesome in the loneliness of the silent spread of the country. With a dogged determination, however, she bent her head and walked swiftly on toward Keene. It was nearly three o'clock when she reached there, and found herself in the depot.

The agent there did not know her, and she walked boldly up to his window and bought a ticket to New York. She knew that if she was followed she could easily be traced to wherever she went, and she depended on keeping out of sight in the great metropolis; so she made no attempt to deceive any inquirers.

It was the three-thirty train, connecting with the Boston express, that she took, and she was unnoticed by the sleepy passengers when she went on board.

Nothing unusual occurred during the journey, and she arrived in New York at seven o'clock, a dreary time for a stranger to enter the great city. She had evidently studied what she would do, and had planned in advance, for her first movement was to inquire of a policeman standing at the entrance to the depot, where she could get some breakfast.

He directed her, and then followed her with a curious eye, for her self-possession and extreme beauty, combined with her plain country garb, excited his wonder.

She entered the restaurant to which he had sent her, and after eating a hearty breakfast, went out and walked at random until she met another policeman, of whom she inquired the way to Oliver street. She noticed his curious glance as he directed her, but she knew that she must betray her country breeding, and also that Oliver street, from

what Jack Hazzard had said, was not a nice neighborhood for her to be asking for.

She was not unmindful of her personal appearance, and would have had it better if she had been able; but, since that was not possible now, she had strength of character enough not to show by her demeanor her own sense of disadvantage.

The policeman had advised her to take the cars, and she was tired enough to have done so, but she was desirous of not getting to the house too soon, and so she walked, inquiring her way occasionally, to be sure that she was going right.

Her first feeling had been one of surprise that the city was so quiet; but as she walked farther down town, and the hour grew later, she fell in with the rushing stream of people going down, and her head began to whirl with the unwonted noise, and the hurry and bustle of the busy crowds.

Nevertheless, she had not yet been molested, nor had she met with any of those startling adventures which most persons from the country expect as a matter of course; and, not knowing that the dangers of the city are mostly abroad at night, began to believe that the city had been maligned.

She had been stared at by bold men, but nothing had been said to her, and but for the distracting confusion, she would have felt quite at her ease. Not that she disliked the noise and bustle, for it was rather exhilarating, but she seemed such an insignificant atom in it, and she did not seem to be able to think as clearly in it yet as she could in the quiet of the country.

But after a while she turned out of Broadway, where she had been walking, and went down Worth street to Chatham square, passing through a wretchedness and squalor that made her sink within herself with horror. In Worth street, too, she encountered ragged, bloated, bleary-eyed men and women, who leered at her and called out after her, so that she was minded to run, and would have done so, but for the dread of doing a foolish thing.

Her heart sank with the thought that it might be in such a neighborhood as that in which Reuben was living. The letter had said the neighborhood was not of the best.

In Chatham square she met a policeman who directed her into Oliver street, and although it was wretched enough, it

was a relief to her that it was not what she had just passed through.

She found the house without any trouble, and it was with a strange feeling in her heart that she went into it with the expectation of seeing once again the man whom she had done so many wicked things to separate from his friends, in order that he would be moved to turn to her as his only friend.

How would he greet her? Was he going to die? If he did, would not his death be at her door? Suppose he had suspected her perfidy, and would now turn from her with loathing?

She had knocked at the door, but, receiving no answer, and finding it open, had gone in. The hall was dirty and solitary, with no means of calling anybody, and so she went involuntarily up a flight of stairs before knocking at any of the inner doors.

The noise of some children was hushed as she knocked at the door, and in a moment there appeared a slipshod, slatternly woman, just from the washtub, as she proved by wiping her arms as she stood in the partly opened doorway.

"Do yeou know if a sick man, by the name of Reuben Whitcomb, lives in this house?" asked Sue.

"There's a sick man on the top flure, back. Sure, I don't know his name."

And, with a lively sense of the value of time, the woman shut the door in Sue's face, and presumably returned to her tub.

Sue turned, with a sickened, stifled feeling, to the stairs, and climbed up to the top floor. She knocked at the door of the back room, and it was opened after a moment's delay by a well-dressed gentleman, who looked curiously at her.

"Is this Reuben Whitcomb's room?" she asked.

"Yes."

The man made no movement to admit her, and he looked so fixedly at her that she became alarmed.

"He is not worse, is he?" she demanded.

"May I ask who you are? No, he is not worse. He is better," he said.

"Oh, I am glad. I am from his home in the country."

"Not Susan Eastman, by chance?"

"Yes, sir. How did you know?"

"Oh," laughed the man, pleasantly, "I met you one night on the road to Keene."

"You?"

"Yes, I. Don't look quite the same, do I? Come in. Don't make a noise, though we'd hardly wake him if we made ever so much, for he is under the influence of morphine."

He admitted her to the room, the walls and ceilings of which proved its wretchedness, in spite of the fresh drug-get on the floor, and the new chairs, and the flowers on the table.

On the bed, which had been made sweet with clean, white linen, lay the motionless figure of a man whom she would never have recognized as Reuben Whitcomb, had she not been warned that it was he.

A stubby beard covered a haggard, livid face, which now was fixed with half-opened eyelids in the heavy sleep induced by the narcotic. He was as little like the Reuben of Swanzey as the well-dressed man by her side was like the tramp she had commissioned to find him.

She stepped softly to the bedside and looked down at his face, and her woman's pity showed itself in the tears that rose to her eyes and filled them.

Jack Hazzard, who was watching her, came over and whispered:

"Don't be alarmed at his looks. He looks a great deal worse than he is. He is entirely out of danger now, and will be well enough to move in a few days. We'll get him into better quarters, and pretty soon he will be well enough to go home. That's the place for a man in his condition. Where is his father?"

Sue flashed a quick glance at him, and turned a vivid red. She was not used to telling falsehoods, and she was going to tell one now.

"He was too sick to come. I came in his place."

"Alone?"

"Yes; we didn't want anybody to know about him. He's so very sensitive."

"Oh. Well, what are you going to do here?"

"I'm going to nurse him till he's well."

"But you can't stay here alone."

"I am going to stay here alone, and yeou won't try to prevent me. Remember, he is all the world to me. I know

it ain't what some girls would do, but I don't care what anybody would do. I want to nurse him, and I don't care what anybody says or thinks."

Jack looked at her, admiringly, and decided that it was worth while to be loved by such a girl in such a way; but, nevertheless, he did not feel that it would be right to let her stay in that house, in that neighborhood, alone with Reuben.

"I like your spirit," he said; "but you don't know city ways and city dangers. I do. You mustn't stay here. I have a woman, who lives in the house, who stays with him at night, and most of the day, and gives him his medicine. You'd better go with me to my mother's, or take a room in some hotel, not too far away, and come here in the daytime."

"Please don't say any more. I am going to stay right here. It's my place."

And to show that she was not to be moved by any argument he might advance, she began deliberately to take off her hat and shawl.

"I see I'll have to leave you to the doctor," he said, laughingly.

"No, yeou won't," she said, earnestly. "Yeou have been his good friend, and I want yeou to be mine. Just say to the doctor that I am here to nurse him."

"But it isn't the proper thing for a young lady to do," he remonstrated.

"It is proper, if I am willing to do it."

"Well," he said, with a smile, "you talk and act like a young woman who was used to having her own way, and I suppose I had better submit with a good grace."

"Thank you."

She said no more to him, and he leaned against the window and watched her go about the room, quietly arranging the chairs, and putting the place in order, as only a woman, trained in such matters, can.

Perhaps it was her beauty, and perhaps it was the feeling that she was equal to the emergency, that made him conclude to let her have her own way. She knew he was watching her, but she felt no uneasiness in his presence, and she continued with her work undisturbed.

She did wish he would leave her alone with Reuben for a while, for even if she could not talk to him, she would be

glad to look at him unobserved. Poor Rubel! But he would surely be grateful to her when he knew that she had left home and friends to share his fortune.

Jack Hazzard, meanwhile, having decided to let her have her way without further opposition, had been planning how to best arrange it for her. He went out and had a big easy-chair and a cot sent in, so that Sue might rest herself. He arranged with the woman who had been acting as nurse to Reuben to send up meals to Sue and to be at her call when wanted. Then he told Sue of what he had done, and she gratefully thanked him.

She took the instructions the doctor had left with him, and promised to rest and call the woman down stairs whenever she felt inclined to do so. In fact, she felt herself comfortably installed in the sick-room, and the sense of doing something drowned the feeling of shame and discomfort she had had ever since she left Swanzey.

To be with Reuben—to feel that she was there with him in his time of need, when every other friend was far away and even unconscious of where he was, or how he was situated, was a great deal to her, who felt in the exclusive possession of him for ever so little a time as he should be sick, a sense of being more to him than anybody else.

Jack Hazzard had explained to her that Reuben would remain under the influence of the drug for a long while, and when she was left alone with him she locked the door and approached him as if she were about to do him some evil. But it was not that, however much her actions gave it that semblance.

She stole toward him on tiptoe, glancing about as if dreading to be seen, and even blushing that she saw herself. She bent over him, pitied him, and then stooped and kissed him.

Then she threw herself in her chair, covered her face with her hands, and thought. And ah! who can guess the thoughts of one placed as she was then? Who can tell what visions of her future rose before her? Who can say what thought or what vision it was that, after a period of stifling silence, caused her to throw her arms up and cry out to the slumbering man:

“Oh, Rube, Rube! You will save me!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

DISCOVERY OF SUE'S FLIGHT.

Ben was always the first to be down stairs in the morning, and on the morning of Sue's flight he was down even earlier than usual, because he purposed going away in the afternoon, and he wished to get as much ahead of his work as might be.

He cleaned out the stove and arranged it so that Sue would need only to put a match to it, as was his custom, and then he went out to the stables to feed and milk. He left the milking to the last moment, and went to the house in what he supposed would be time for breakfast.

He found his father in the kitchen preparing the breakfast, but gave it no especial thought until he had poured out the milk into the pans and taken them to the cellar. When he came up again, he asked:

"Where's Sue?"

"Wa'n't she aout to the barn wi' yeou?"

"No."

"Thought she must 'a been. Ain't seen nothin' on her. Must be in her room. Call her, will yeou?"

Without waiting to be asked Ben had sprung up the stairs. The remembrance of Sue's words to him the night before was in his mind, and his first fear was that she was really sick. He knocked at her door; gently at first, and then louder. Receiving no answer, he at last turned the knob, and took in at the first glance the disorder in the room. But that did not make any impression on him until he saw that the bed had not been occupied.

Then he sprang into the room and glanced searchingly around it, a sickening fear of indefinable things oppressing him. His first and instant thought, remembering what she had said about dying, was that she had made away with herself. He called her name, gently at first, then more loudly.

He received no answer, and had expected none. He

lifted and threw down the various things strewn about the bed and floor. He ran out and up into the garret. He threw open a window and looked around with a horrible dread of what he should find.

He ran back to her room, calling her by name as he went. She was not yet in her room. He called down to his father to ask him if she had come yet. The answer came at once that she had not.

Once more he ran into her room, and this time searched it more slowly. Now the paper in the mirror, which had escaped his eye before, attracted his attention. He took it down and read it.

"I have gone away," he read slowly. "It will be useless to look for me, for I shall never come back. SUE."

He turned the paper over, and looked for something else to help him understand this thing. No, there was nothing more. Only those few words.

He took the letter down to his father and told him how he had found it. He told him what Sue had said to him the night before, and together they tried to make it out.

"Jest a whim, like's not," said the old man, rather tentatively than affirmatively. "Gone to some o' the neighbors, visitin'."

"No, father, Sue wouldn't a' done that," said Ben, positively. "Somethin's wrong with the girl. I was afraid on it last night, when she talked so strange like. Look here, father, you see to the men when they come, an' I'll hitch up an' go 'round to see the neighbors, an' find out if they know anything 'bout her."

Ben was rather slow than quick of thought, but once aroused he could act as quickly as any, and action, as with many others, seemed to stimulate thought. He hastily put his favorite horse into the buggy, and then, without a moment of hesitation, drove over to Squire Stratton's.

He had a double motive in doing so. One was to get the opinion of the squire, a famously shrewd man, and the other was to consult Ruth, she having seen rather more of Sue for some time than anybody else out of the Eastman household.

It did not take him long to reach the squire's, and they were still at the breakfast-table when he drove up, and tied his horse at the gate. The squire went out at once, seeing

in Ben's haste something unusual. Ben told him the story as he knew it. The squire questioned him shrewdly, but could get no further light on the subject.

"Let's see Ruth," he said at last.

He called Ruth, and she, wondering at the summons under such peculiar circumstances, went out to them, leaving her sisters a prey to the liveliest curiosity. Ben told her the story and showed her the letter. Then her father questioned her, but she could throw no more light on the subject than any one else.

Ben was in despair and started off, intending to see some of the other neighbors. The squire asked him where he was going, and Ben told him.

"Don't do it yet," said the squire. "You'll only spread the news and won't likely get any information. It's clear enough to me that a girl like Sue would not write a letter like this unless she meant it. I think she has really gone away somewhere. Do you want my advice?"

"Sartain."

"Then do you go home and search everything she had for something to show where she has gone. As sure as you live there will be something to betray her. I'll go to Keene right away after breakfast and inquire at the depot if she has been there."

"Thank yeou. I'll do as yeou say."

He turned to go.

"Hold on. Ruth, get your things on. She'll go with you, Ben, and kind o' see to things while you're so upset. Put your bonnet on, Ruth."

At any other time such an order would have filled Ben with joy, but now he was too much concerned about Sue to think of the pleasant side of it. Ruth was more conscious than he, and would have objected and sent one of her sisters in her place, if she had not glanced at Ben and noticed how troubled he looked. Why should she obtrude her little affairs at such a serious moment?

She hurried into the house and came out a moment later prepared for the ride with Ben. He placed her in the buggy almost mechanically, and it was not until they were well on their way and had begun to converse about Sue and the possible cause of her disappearance, that he realized that one good had come out of the trouble—that he was driving with Ruth by his side.

As soon as they reached the house, she went straight to the kitchen and began to bring order out of the chaos which a party of men bent on getting something to eat had created there. She was so engaged when Ben came in and went up stairs. He said nothing to her, but he was calm enough now to notice how cheerful the place seemed with her there.

Ruth felt the strangeness of her position the more now that she was actually in Ben's house, engaged in doing the very things she would have done for him if she had consented to be his wife. She was glad to be of use, but she decided that she would go home after dinner and let one of her sisters come over in her place.

There was so much to do that for a time she forgot that Ben was up stairs; but presently it came to her, and she wondered why he was there so long. She went to the stairs and listened, feeling very uncomfortable to find everything so silent as it was.

Then she called him by name, and, when he did not answer, called louder. As he still did not answer, she became alarmed and ran up stairs to Sue's room. She knew perfectly well where it was. The door was open, and as she looked in she saw Ben on his knees by the bed, busy with some papers.

He did not look up, though she purposely made a noise, and she was a little annoyed that he had paid no attention to her call. She called again, saying:

"Didn't you hear me when I called, Ben?"

He looked around, and she noticed that his face was strangely agitated.

"Come here, Ruth," he said, but his voice was so low and hoarse that Ruth could hardly understand him.

"What's the matter?" she asked, frightened.

"Come, read this," was the only answer.

She went into the room, and on the bed she saw a number of scraps of paper, such as would be made by one who had torn a sheet of paper into shreds. Ben had placed some of them together, and had been reading what was to be deciphered. He pointed out one irregular lot of scraps to Ruth to read. She leaned over his shoulder, with a foreboding of some evil to be learned there, and read:

"—know you would like the life here. It would suit your spirit, and * * * * * As for Ben, he will never know * * * ly,

"REUBEN WHITCOMB."

That was all. Those few words, with long breaks between the parts restored and the parts missing.

Ruth read the words to the end, with a wonder increasing at each word, until she came to the name signed at the last. Then it seemed as if the blood had surged in one volume from her heart. Her eyes swam, but she steadied herself, and with Ben's eyes fixed on her, with a strange expression, read the words again.

She turned and looked at him, with a pallor spreading over her face.

"Reuben Whitcomb," he said, hoarsely.

"Oh, Rube, Rube, how could you!" cried Ruth, and covering her face with her hands, she fell weeping by the side of the little bed.

"Don't cry for him!" exclaimed Ben, harshly. "Don't cry for him! The hound! The scoundrel! With his fine clothes and manners! But I will find him if I never come back here! Curse him! And if I do find him, he shall pay for this. He shall pay for it."

Ruth looked at him through her falling tears and shrank back, frightened at his furious anger.

"There may be some mistake, Ben?" she said, tremulously.

"Mistake!" he cried, scornfully. "That is the way with you women. It don't matter if a man tries to be honest and straightforward. Yeou can't love that sort. Yeou must have fine gentlemen, who can lie and abuse yeou, who can break yeour hearts, and ruin your honor. But I will find him, and when I do, Heaven help his cowardly soul!"

He clenched his hands and shook them so furiously that Ruth shrank away, crying:

"Oh, Ben, Ben!"

He turned his flashing eyes on her as she sat there on the floor cowering in a heap, and there were anger, scorn, and entreaty in his voice, as he said to her:

"Would you have me sit still, then, and do nothing? I let him take my love away when I did not think him fit for her. I let him treat me as no other man should, jest for her sake. But, now, when he crawls into my own house and steals away the virtue of my good as sister, shall I let him go? No! What! can yeou, pure and good as yeou are, love him now? Do yeou, Ruth Stratton, love that cursed scoundrel?"

"There may be some mistake, Ben. You don't know him as I do."

"Thank Heaven I don't."

Ben stalked angrily past her, stopping only to take from the bed a piece of an envelope on which was a printed heading. He went to his room and changed his clothing, putting on his best. Then he went out and told his father that Sue had probably gone to New York and that he was going after her, to bring her back if he could.

He put his horse to the buggy again and took one of the men with him, to drive back. The excitement of the man communicated itself to the horse and it sped along toward Keene at a furious pace. On the way they met the squire returning from Keene.

He motioned Ben to stop and told him that he had discovered that a woman answering the description of Sue had bought a ticket for New York.

"But that," said the shrewd squire, "may be only a blind. She may have gone to Boston."

"No," said Ben, savagely, "she's gone to New York, and I've got the address. Ask Ruth. I want to catch that noon train."

He touched the restless horse with his whip and it sprang forward into a long trot, which it kept up until Keene was reached. Ben stopped at the bank to draw some money, and then sent his horse home while he went on to the depot.

It was a dreary six hours he spent in the cars on the way to New York, but his anger did not cool with the lapse of time. He was in a mood to be dangerous, and had he met Reuben then it would have been bad for him.

It was night when he reached the city, but he did not even stop to eat something before going to the address on the envelope, which was that of one of the cheap lodging-houses on the Bowery. He did not know his way around the city, but he inquired, and was soon at the place he wished to find.

It was a motley crowd gathered in the general room of the house, but Ben gave no heed to them, going straight to the desk and asking for Reuben Whitcomb.

"What's the matter with that feller, anyway?" demanded the man at the desk.

"What d'ye mean?" asked Ben.

"Why, a bloke was here a day or two ago askin' for him. Is he wanted?"

"I want him," answered Ben, simply.

"Well, you'll have to find him, then. He don't owe me nothin', and I don't know where he is."

Ben turned away, and then suddenly bethought him.

"I'm willin' to pay for anything yeou tell me," he said.

"I don't know nothin' about him, I tell ye. Hold on a minute! Boys," he addressed the assembly in the large room, "does any of yous remember a feller that was here 'bout a month ago. He was terribly down on his luck, and was drinkin' like a fish. We used to call him Whitey. Any of yous know where he is? The gent is ready to pony up for any information."

Ben was instantly surrounded by a crowd of unsavory fellows, none of whom could tell him exactly where Reuben was, but all of whom would make inquiries if Ben would but advance a trifle on account.

Ben had wit enough to value their services truly, and he left the place, baffled for the time, but not discouraged. He knew so little of the city and its ways, however, that he was at a loss how to proceed, and could think of nothing better than walking the streets in the hope of meeting one or the other of the two people he was seeking.

He ate a supper in a restaurant, and then began that most hopeless of tasks—the searching for a person in the streets of a great city. He would have given the task up at once had it been only Reuben he wanted, but the thought of leaving Sue at the mercy of so unscrupulous a scoundrel as he believed Reuben to be was not to be thought of.

So he walked the streets till he was too weary to stand, when he was reluctantly forced to give it up until morning. He sought a cheap hotel and went to bed, utterly tired out.

In the morning he returned to the lodging-house on the Bowery, in the hope that, stimulated by the prospect of a reward, some of the lodgers might have found Reuben.

The man at the desk laughed at the idea, and told Ben not to place any dependence on them.

"Is it very important?" he asked.

"A matter of life and death," answered Ben, with lowering brows.

"Why don't you go to headquarters, then?"

"What headquarters?"

"Police Headquarters, of course. Tell them who he is an' what he looks like, an' maybe they'll know. If he ain't a crook, though, 'taint likely. But I'd try if I was you."

It seemed so much more likely to produce results than simply prowling about the streets on the chance of meeting him, that Ben resolved to try headquarters.

He no longer hoped to save Sue from the result of her infatuation for Reuben, but he did think he might bring such pressure to bear on him as to force him to make the reparation of marriage with the misguided girl.

He sought a policeman, and told him his story—that is, so much of it as related to Reuben. The man shook his head, but advised him to go to headquarters, directing him thither.

Ben went and told his story to the Inspector of Police who was there, and then was so questioned that he was at last obliged to tell the whole story, including that about Sue. As soon as Sue was mentioned the inspector pricked up his ears.

"Why didn't you tell me about the girl in the first place?" he said.

And then, having asked all manner of questions about her and what clothes she wore, many of which Ben could answer, but many of which he could not, the inspector went into his telephone-room and talked with several different persons, as it seemed.

Then he told Ben to wait a while, saying he thought he had discovered something about the girl. So Ben waited in that lugubrious place until a man came in and talked with the inspector about a girl who had looked thus and so, who wore such and such garments, who had such and such an accent, and who asked her way to Oliver street.

"Any number?" asked the inspector, who had watched Ben most of the time.

"No, sir."

"That will do." The officer left and the inspector turned to Ben. "Do you think it is the same one?"

"Sertain."

"Well, it is something to know she went to Oliver street. I will send an officer to Oliver street with you, and if she is in any of the houses there he will find her. But don't be

too hopeful. She may not be there. If she is, what are you going to do?"

A dangerous light shone in Ben's eye.

"No violence, young man," said the inspector, sternly. "I'll help you as far as I can; but I'll have no violence.

Ben bowed his head without answering. The inspector looked at him, and then rang his bell, whispered to the attendant, and a few minutes later an officer in citizen's clothes entered the room.

The inspector explained as much of the case as it was necessary for him to know, and then told him to take Ben with him, and find the girl. The man nodded, looked at Ben, and, as the latter arose, led the way from the room.

"Do you think you will find her?" asked Ben of the officer when they were in the street.

"If she's in Oliver street, I will find her before noon," answered the officer, so confidently that Ben no longer had any doubt.

CHAPTER XIX.

SUE AND RUBE TALK.

Sue was tired enough to sleep, but her thoughts would not let her. Until she had had a talk with Reuben, she could not compose herself to anything. She would go to his bedside, and watch his almost imperceptible breathing; she would move noiselessly about the room, re-arranging the furniture, putting fresh water on the flowers, and trying to think of any device whereby she could give the room a cozier appearance.

Then she would stand and look out of the window on the dreary prospect of dingy roofs, until a flood of sudden, unbidden thought would overwhelm her, and she would throw herself into a chair, moaning.

But at last a grateful occupation suggested itself. She looked at Reuben's clothing, and saw that it sadly needed mending. Glad to be busy, and doubly glad to be working on something for Reuben, she got out her little sewing-bag and was soon almost happy in her task.

Not in a prying spirit, but tenderly she emptied his pockets, and the tears started to her eyes as the contents betrayed the sad passes to which Reuben had been forced—a

crust of bread and an unsavory piece of meat, wrapped in a piece of greasy newspaper.

Not a cent of money, not a line from any of the loving hearts at home, nothing save the food, which made her turn sick, only to look at it, and in the inner pocket of his vest the old, worn Testament which had been his mother's.

Tears dropped from Sue's eyes as she looked at these things, and they were not all tears for Reuben. Some of them were for herself, as she thought of what she had done, and what might be her fate. She had cast herself out from the home of her friends; would Reuben wake from his deep sleep only to tell her that her sacrifice had been useless?

She threw the bread and meat away, and reverently put the Testament back in the pocket from which she had taken it. She did not open it. It seemed as if she dreaded even to hold it in her hand.

She leaned her head on her hand, and looked at Reuben as he lay there so still and death-like. She tried to imagine what sort of a life he had led during the months she had not heard from him, and, with a shudder, she wondered if she would ever have a like experience.

What must Reuben have come to, that he had treasured a stale crust and a dry shred of meat? With a quick movement she opened the bosom of her gown, and ripped the threads that held her money. She separated a ten-dollar bill from the rest, and placed it in the watch-pocket of the vest. She remembered the handsome gold watch Reuben used to carry, and wondered where it had gone.

"He need never know I put it there," she muttered.

At noon the woman down stairs brought her some dinner, the eating of which suggested to her the advisability of cooking herself some of the dainty home things for Reuben. She knew of many tempting sick-room dishes, and she asked the woman if she would buy her the materials.

Early in the afternoon the doctor came again, and was pleased that Reuben still slept. He was pleased, too, at the way Sue had tidied up the place, and told her so. This emboldened her to tell him that she was from Reuben's home, and to ask him if there would be any harm in talking to Reuben when he should wake up.

"None at all. Do him good," said the doctor.

"He is really better, then?"

"Almost well. Doesn't need much more than your nursing now. We'll let him go home in a few days."

Sue said nothing to that. She let the doctor go without asking any more questions than such as related to the medicine and treatment; but with a sickening sense of dread she waited for the awakening.

It came at last, but it was not as she had expected. He lay for some time on his back, indifferent to anything, though she moved about to attract his attention, and did everything but speak to him. And by and by, when he did turn his head, he showed no surprise at seeing her there.

"Rube," she cried, "don't yeou know me?"

"Is that you, Sue?" he asked, dully.

But that was only because the effects of the drug were slow in wearing off. He seemed to realize the strangeness later on, and asked all sorts of questions. He wanted to know how she came to be there, and how long she had been there, and many other things, though he said nothing yet about home or his father.

She dreaded to hear him ask about Ruth, the first one, but he did not, and she refused to answer his other questions until he should have eaten some of the dishes she had cooked for him.

The sight of them affected him as if he had been a child. He laughed and talked about them, and ate them with a relish, and her spirits rose to see how he seemed to depend upon her for everything. He lay for some time after eating without saying a word.

His wits were clearer now, and the strangeness of having Sue there, waiting on him, roused a curiosity in his breast that would not be appeased, and yet he dreaded to ask her any questions. He followed her movements about the room, his eyes, very large because of his emaciation, so full of the longing to ask, that she could not bear it any longer.

She had made up her mind what to say to him, and she was afraid lest he should ask such questions as would embarrass her. She hastened to put the dishes away, and then drew a chair to the bedside and sat down.

"I know you want to hear all about home," she said. "And why I am here, and a great deal more. Let me tell yeou, and do yeou listen. It will be better if yeou don't talk too much."

"It makes me better to see you, Sue," he said. "You

don't know what I've gone through. How I have wanted to see a home face!"

He was too weak to control himself, and the tears rolled down his cheeks. She wiped the tears away, feeling a secret joy in doing it, and answered:

"Yeou know the gentleman who has been so kind to yeou?"

"Mr. Hazzard, yes."

"I saw him aout to Swanzey, and I asked him to look yeou up here. He did, and found yeou, and that's how I come to be here. He wrote me. I thought mebbe yeou would be glad if I didn't tell yeour father, an' so he don't know."

"Thank you. I'd like to see him, but I'm glad he can't see me like this. How is he?"

"Jest as well as can be. Nobody knows I came," she said, looking furtively at him to see if he would comprehend.

He did not for a moment, but then he seemed to, for he turned suddenly toward her, and asked:

"Nobody at all? Not Ben, nor anybody?"

"Nobody. I left home to come and nurse yeou. Ran away, I s'pose yeou'd call it."

"Ran away! For me?" he said, slowly.

"Yes, and I can never go back now."

The rich blood ebbed and flowed to and from her cheeks, making them now a vivid crimson, and now an ashen gray. It was in her mind to tell the wretchedest falsehood of her life, but her courage would hardly bear her out in it.

"Never go back!" he repeated after her. "But what will you do?"

"I do not care. Are yeou strong enough to bear all I have to tell yeou?"

He sank back on his pillow with a little gasp of apprehension, and she pitied him for the blow she was about to strike him in his moment of weakness; but she must do it, or give up her cherished plan of winning him. She bent over him, and stroked his hand pitifully.

"Tell me what it is," he asked.

"You have not asked me about Ruth," she said.

"No, I did not dare. Go on."

"Well, she is to marry Ben."

"I was afraid so," he whispered. "Well, it is right. I

did not deserve her, and he did. Sue, I have had time to think since I have been here. I was a fool. She loved me then. I have always loved her. I would have written, asking her pardon, but I came to be such a wretch—drunk most of the time, Sue.”

He looked at her as if expecting to see her shrink away from him, but she did not. She only caressed his hand softly. He looked gratefully at her, and she went on:

“I did what I could to prevent the match, but it was not possible.”

“No, no; I can see. It was natural they should come together. But, oh, I loved her, Sue!”

“Ben discovered after a time that yeou and I corresponded. He threatened to turn me aout of the house if I didn’t stop writin’ to yeou.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that of Ben,” said Reuben.

“Well, he did, an’ he would ’a stopped my coming to yeou if he’d known it. He will know where I am, an’ by this time I s’pose all the Swanzey folks ’ll be saying hard things ’bout me; but, Rube, I couldn’t let yeou, the best friend I ever had, lie here sick an’ friendless an’ not come to yeou, even if I did lose my good name by it.”

“Lose your good name?”

She blushed, but went on:

“Yes; no one knows yeour sick, an’ everybody ’ll say the worst they can. I can never go back there again.”

“You are willing to do this for me, Sue? I wish you hadn’t.”

“I’m sorry if yeou don’t like it, Rube, but I did it for the best.”

“Don’t think I’m not grateful, Sue. I am. But I can’t bear to have you suffer for a kindness to me. Go back now.”

“And be the by-word of the whole county? Never! I shall never go there again as Sue Eastman.”

Rube turned on his side, with his face to the wall, and lay there a prey to misery. He thought he saw Sue’s case better than she did. She had come to him out of pure kindness of heart, and in so doing had sacrificed her good name—a woman’s dearest possession.

During the months of wretchedness in the great city he had, as he had told Sue, thought a great deal. He had come to look upon himself as the most unworthy and des-

picable of wretches. His shame had indeed been so great that he would not even write to his good old father to help him. It seemed to him that a man who had wasted his opportunities as he had was unworthy of help. He had become as humble as he once had been proud.

And now it bore upon him heavily that Sue, who had always been a steadfast friend, should become an outcast for his sake. Then, too, there was the added misery of knowing that Ruth was forever lost to him.

A sudden idea! He turned to where Sue sat, with drawn face, waiting for him to speak.

"Sue, why are you so good a friend to me?" he asked.

The blood rushed to her face, and she faltered as she answered:

"How can I tell? Why should I not be yeour friend?"

"But to be willing to sacrifice your reputation for me!"

"I would have sacrificed more if it could have helped yeou."

"Then if I asked you to marry me, would you do it?"

"Are you in earnest, Rube?"

"Yes."

"Then I say yes. It would be the happiest day of my life that saw me yeour wife."

"Let us be married, Sue. I can't talk any more. You know I love Ruth. I am not fit for any good woman, but if you will save your good name by marrying me I will try — Oh, I feel so faint, Sue!"

He had exhausted himself with the excitement of the talk, and would have fainted but for Sue's exertions. She bathed his head with cologne, and fanned him, and presently the gray look passed out of his face, and he said, faintly:

"The sooner the better, Sue. I don't seem to be very strong."

"You mean to be married?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"Do yeou mean right away?"

"Yes."

"Shall I get a minister?"

"Yes."

"I will go now," she said. "I will ask the woman down stairs where to find one. And do not be discouraged, Rube."

Yeou will be well and strong soon, and, with me to help yeou, we will get along."

He smiled faintly, and shut his eyes, sinking into a sort of slumber almost at once. She leaned over him and kissed him, and then hurried on her hat and shawl, with a singular air of frightened exultation. With another light kiss on his lips, she hastened away.

He slept for some time, but at last awoke, and looked wildly around him.

"I thought Ruth was here," he whispered. "Oh, yes, we are to be married—that is it. I must get up, or I shall be too late."

He struggled to an upright position, and passed his hand over his head as he scowled in an effort of memory.

"Oh, yes; I was to meet her on the road by Eames'. I must hurry."

He could scarcely stand on his feet, but the urgency of his delirium would not let him rest until he had drawn his clothes on. He steadied himself now and then by a chair or other object, and stared feebly around, making repeated efforts to collect his scattered senses.

But the only thing that seemed to come to him was the idea of hurrying lest he should be late for the wedding. He did not find his hat after a short and anxious search, and he left the room without it.

He got down the stairs in some way, and staggered out into the street, down which he went, muttering and swaying. It was not long before he was surrounded by a crowd of ragged urchins, who espied in him the legitimate sport of the city child—a drunken man.

They pelted him with every available object, and drove him before them, heedless of their gibes or missiles. He went, without a defined purpose, as far as his strength would take him. Then he sank upon the pavement, and lay there, mocked and derided by the waifs of the street, and avoided by the passers-by.

At last a policeman came upon him, and, having tried in vain to rouse him by beating his stockinged feet with his club, caught him by the collar of his coat and jerked him to his feet. Then he seemed to realize that he had a sick instead of a drunken man to deal with, and laid him down again, while he went to ring for an ambulance.

The ambulance came, Reuben was lifted into it, and carried off to the hospital.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WOMAN'S STORY.

The officer who led Ben to Oliver street wasted no time in circumlocution. He went at once to the officer who took the first blocks of that street in his beat, and asked him if he knew anything of such a person as Sue, describing her.

"Dark eyes, pretty, from the country?" asked the officer.

"Yes."

"See her twice this mornin'." said the officer.

"Anybody with her?"

"No. Alone."

"Know what house she came out of?"

"Not for certain. Som'eres near the other end of this block."

It seemed to Ben marvelous that it should be so easy to trace a person in such a bewildering city. He did not reckon as the police did on the fact that Sue had two strongly marked peculiarities—she was plainly from the country, and she was very pretty.

They went to the other end of the block, and inquired from house to house until they came to No. 33. After making inquiries there, the officer said to Ben:

"If she's anywhere, if it's the right party, she's here."

Ben turned very pale, and trembled.

"And he's with her?" he answered.

"If he's the sick man, yes."

Ben started to run up the stairs. The officer put his hand restrainingly on his arm.

"Hold on a minute. What are you going to do?"

Ben turned, and there was a fierce light in his eyes, but he answered:

"I don't know."

"No," said the officer, slowly, "I don't think you quite do know. Do you even know what your rights are?"

"My rights?"

"Yes. You want the girl to go home with you, don't you?"

"Ya-as," answered Ben, slowly.

"She's over age, ain't she? Over eighteen, you said, didn't you?"

"Ya-as."

"Well, then, if she wants to stay here, you can't force her to go with you."

"I couldn't force her anyhow," said Ben, sadly. "But," he added, with a sort of fierce scorn, "I can make him marry her."

"Don't know as you can; but we can try to scare him into it," said the officer. "And, mind now! no violence. You'd better let me go first, and do the talking with him. Come, now, be reasonable, or I won't help you at all."

Ben seemed inclined to be rebellious, but his better sense asserted itself, and he yielded, and followed the officer up the stairs.

The officer, without the least indecision, and as if he had been in the house fifty times, instead of never before, went up to the room which had been Reuben's, and knocked. Receiving no answer after several times knocking, he opened the door, and went in. He glanced around it, and then said, sententiously:

"The man's skipped! The girl's some'eres about."

Ben looked at him anxiously, but said nothing. The officer went on, with the pride of a professional to a novice:

"Man's clothes gone. Girl's gripsack here; comb and brush on bureau, and room tidy. We'll go down to the next floor and see if anybody there knows anything about the matter."

He knocked at the door on the floor beneath.

"Know anything about folks on top floor back?" he asked, at the same time throwing back the lapel of his coat to show his badge.

In that quarter of the city the sight of an officer in citizen's clothing is always alarming. The woman who opened the door was guilty only of the crime of poverty, but she turned pale and stammered as she tried to answer.

"The top flure, is it?" she asked.

"That's what I said. Top floor back. Come, speak up."

"Sure, sir, I don't know anything about it, only the sick man's gone an' the poor girl's most crazy."

"Skipped, eh? I thought so," and the officer turned with a smile that begged Ben to bear witness to his acuteness.

But Ben was very little interested in that now, and he turned to the woman and anxiously asked:

"Where is she?"

"If she ain't up stairs she's out lookin' for him, poor thing."

"He ran away from her, did he?" demanded Ben.

"He did, an' him that sick he couldn't git out o' bed."

Ben's presence and manner reassured the woman, who seemed to instinctively know his errand to be one in favor of Sue.

"How do you know he was so sick?" demanded the officer, turning to Ben to give him to understand that he would turn the woman's intelligence inside out.

"Sure, I was his nurse till she kem, an' a sick man he was, as the doctor'll tell ye if ye ask him."

"Had a doctor, did he? Couldn't have been so very sick if he could walk off so suddenly. Who is the doctor? Where does he live?"

"Sure I don't know. The gentleman brought him here."

"Aha! There was another gentleman, was there?" and the officer again attracted Ben's attention to the fact of his acuteness in bringing this out. "Who was this other gentleman? What is his name?"

"Mr. Hazzard, an' a fine gentleman, too."

"And what's become of him?"

"Sure, I don't know that. He ginerally comes twict a day; but he hasn't been here since the young lady come."

The officer closed one eye and looked knowingly at Ben.

"Hasn't been here since, eh? And when did the sick man go away?"

"Yisterday afternoon. It was like this: I was a clearin' up like, an' she kem down lookin' so happy an' in a great hurry. She had her things on, an' ses I, 'An' where're ye goin'?' With that she looked at me with them big black eyes o' her'n an' jess laughed. 'I want a minister,' ses she. 'I'm goin' to be married to Rube'—that's what she called him; an' I never see a girl so happy. An' him so sick he

cudn't lift his head. Well, I told her where she cud find a clergyman, an' that was all I knowed till she kem rushin' into me room here, lookin' crazy like, an' askin' for the sick man. 'Where would he be but in his bed,' ses I. With that she grabbed me and tuk me up to his room, an' he was gone."

"He must have been sick," said the officer, looking at Ben.

"The hound!" groaned Ben.

"What did the girl do then?" asked the officer.

"She asked me did I know; an' when I said no, she ran out into the street to find him. But she cudn't, for she kem back an' asked me more questions. An' while she was talkin' along kem one o' them messenger boys an' giv her a letter. She read it an' said, 'Oh, Heaven! he's gone, too!' an' I thought for a minute she was goin' to faint. But she didn't. She went out again, an' staid out till night, when I heard her goin' up to her room, bein' on the lookout for her, like. I went up with some supper, but she was for not eatin' it. I made her, an' so I did again this mornin'. She's out lookin' for him now, belike."

"You're sure you don't know anything more about this matter?" demanded the officer.

"I am."

The officer took Ben by the arm and led him out of the room, saying to the woman that they were going to the room up stairs, and that she was not to tell the young woman if she came home while they were there. When they were in the upper room he said to Ben:

"Well, you see the little game, I suppose?"

"I s'pose he's run away from her."

"Run away? Well, I should smile. Did she have any money with her?"

"Must have had."

"That's it. He's got her money an' skipped."

"Oh, he wouldn't do that. He ain't that sort."

"Isn't he? Well, just look at it. He gets her to come on here, shammin' sick, for I'm satisfied he wasn't any more sick than I am. He had some one in with him. This feller Hazzard and the doctor was both in with him, you can gamble on that. Well, she pulls her little pile out of the bank, or wherever she had it, an' comes on here. He tells her she must go for the minister just as soon as she has

put her money in his hands for safe-keeping. Well, she goes, and he skips with her money in safe-keeping. Don't you see?"

The officer certainly told a probable enough story; but Ben found it difficult to believe that Reuben had fallen so low as such a theory would make it seem. But then he remembered that Reuben had been accused of the bank robbery, and although he had afterward been cleared of suspicion, had he not refused to remain in Swanzey when there was every reason otherwise why he should? And had he not made a victim of Sue?

Ben almost forgot his anger in his horror of such infamy as seemed to have been practiced by one who had once been a playfellow of his. He could not quite believe it, but at the same time he could not help dwelling on the corroborative circumstances of the case. It even began to shape itself in his mind that this was one of the results of forsaking honest country ways, and taking to advanced education, city manners, and fine clothes.

"I'll tell you, now," said the officer. "I can't do anything more here, now; so I'll go back; but you wait here, till the girl comes back, and get what you can out of her. Then, if it seems that he has robbed her, you bring her around to headquarters, and we'll see if we can find him. Get a description of the men if you can anyhow."

Ben acquiesced, though he hardly comprehended any more than that he was to be left alone to await the coming of Sue. This he was glad of. He let the officer go, and he seated himself in a chair, leaving the door open so that he could hear if she came to the room down stairs.

What should he say to her when she did come, he did not know. He had not formulated any ideas in his mind. He was simply waiting for her, ready to do for her anything he could, without any scorn for her, with no reproaches in his heart, and only fearful that she would meet him with anger and obstinacy.

The man upon whom he could have wreaked his first fury was gone, and with him was gone all of that anger which had so far urged Ben on. Now he had to see only the poor victim, and for her had a generous man's pity and tenderness.

In his sturdy honesty he could not but wonder how it had ever come about. How man could be so vile; how woman

could be so weak. And the wonder of all was how Sue could be that woman.

But now, as he thought of it, and reviewed all the circumstances, he seemed to see that all the while that Sue had been urging him to a course which would separate Ruth from Reuben, she had been working in her own interests instead of in his, as he had at the time believed.

It was a heart-sickening subject for him to think of, and he was relieved at the same time that he trembled with nervous dread at the sound of a light, but slow and dragging footstep, on the stairs.

He knew instinctively that Sue was coming, and he hardly dared to face her.

It was Sue dragging her weary limbs up the stairs. She took no heed of the fact that the door of her room was open, and unsuspecting of a visitor there, walked in. Ben saw her before she did him, and he started with dismay at sight of her haggard, drawn face.

His whole great heart went out in pity and tenderness for her, who had been as a sister to him. He had risen from his chair, and now stepped forward a pace. She heard the movement almost before she saw him, and turned with a glad, gasping cry, which changed to one of angry defiance as she saw Ben. She turned quickly, as if she would go, but he stepped forward and took her gently by the arm.

"Don't be angry, Sue," he said, appealingly, rather as if he were the offender, than as if she were in any way culpable. "I've followed yeou to take yeou hum."

She laughed with aggressive bitterness.

"Take me hum? I said I wouldn't never go back."

"I know everything, Sue, but nobody else does. Come home, do."

"Never, Ben, an' you might as well go back."

"I can't leave you here, Sue."

"Yeou can't help it."

She let herself drop into a chair, and he could see that she was weary to exhaustion; but she abated nothing of her bitterness and defiance. He did not know what to do to move her. He knew her violent and obstinate temper, and almost despaired.

"Sue," he said, pleadingly, "I can't say yeou must go, an' I don't want to; but won't yeou talk it over with me?"

If I didn't know nothin' 'bout it, 'twould be dif'rent; but I know everything."

"What d'yeou know?" she asked, with a sneering smile.

"I know all 'bout Rube an'—an'—yeou."

"Oh!" and she sneered again.

"I know he promised to marry yeou an' never intended to."

"Yeou don't know it," she exclaimed, furiously. "Yeou can't know any such a thing. Nobody can know that."

"Well, Sue, he ran away while yeou went for the minister."

"He was aout of his head an' didn't know what he was doing."

"Didn't he take yeour money with him?"

"No, he didn't. Who's been putting yeou up to this, Ben Eastman? You never thought o' that out o' yeour own head. Who did?"

"Never mind abaout that, Sue. Yeou must know yeou can't stay here alone. What would come o' yeou? I can't let yeou go like this, Sue. Come home."

"Never. Yeou're only wastin' time."

"Let me help yeou hunt for Rube, then. I can't let yeou stay here alone. Yeou know yeou can trust me, Sue."

"Why d'yeou want to help me hunt for Rube?"

"To make him marry yeou," answered Ben, with sudden anger.

She laughed scornfully, but said nothing.

Ben bent his head in painful thought for some moments. He was no match for Sue. He never had been able to manage her, and he could not seem to make any impression on her now. Suddenly a thought struck him.

"Do yeou remember, Sue, that last night yeou were home?"

"What of it?"

"Yeou said suthin' to me, 'bout not bein' ongrateful for what father and me had done.

"Goin' to remind me o' that, be yeou?" she asked, in a hard tone.

"Not for unkindness, Sue. Yeou know that. Nobody knows any better than yeou that I never would say a word to call for thanks. No, Sue, I only spoke of it in hopes yeou would remember haow yeou felt that night, an' mebbe feel a leetle that way naow."

Sue's head sank until it rested on her hand. She was much too tired to fight, but she felt so hard and bitter toward all the world that she could not yield to the self-pity which she felt.

The gesture went straight to Ben's soft heart, and he stepped to her side and knelt there, taking the hand that hung listlessly at her side in his, and saying in a husky voice:

"See here, Sue. I'm most broken-hearted over this, I be. I did come daown here full o' vengeance on Rube; but I'll drop all that, an' do anything yeou say. If yeou say the word, we'll sell aout the old place at Swanzey an' go aout West, where nobody knows us. And if—I don't know how to say it, Sue—but if anything happens, I'll—I'll—be a—— But, there! it's no use sayin' what yeou know. Come, Sue! Yeou don't need to go back to Swanzey; father an' I'll go with yeou. Never think o' Rube Whitcomb. Come, won't ye?"

There was something so tender and compassionate in his tone that Sue could not hear him unmoved. She struggled for a moment, and then gave up to the grief that wrung her heart.

"Don't cry, Sue—don't cry, dear! It shall be jest as yeou like. Anything you say, Sue. If yeou can't give up Rube, I'll hunt him aout—not mad, though I can't never like him arter what he's done—an' when I find him I'll talk right to him an' get him to marry yeou. Will that do, Sue?"

He was so kind and good that Sue, being weakened with hunger and fatigue, had much ado to keep from telling him that Reuben was in no wise guilty; but she had wit enough to realize that to do so would be to lead up to other and more awkward topics, and moreover would lose Reuben to her should he be found.

"I don't want you and Rube to come together, Ben," she said in a subdued tone. "I might as well say I love Rube, and know he will marry me when I find him. He went away when he was aout of his head. I know he wouldn't have done it any other way. Yeou leave me here an' I'll find him."

"No; I can't leave yeou, Sue. I'll stay here an' help yeou to find him, if yeou must do it."

"But I don't want yeou to find him," she cried, in an irritated tone.

"Then I'll stay with yeou and take care on yeou while yeou look for him."

"Yeou don't need. I can take care o' myself."

She protested, indeed, but rather weakly, and Ben saw that he had persuaded her.

"I won't be in yeour way, Sue. - I'll remain with yeou until yeou've found him an' got married, and then I'll go."

"Where can yeou stay?"

"Oh, I'll find a place."

"But your work at the farm?"

"Father'll find somebody to do it, for a while."

"I must have this room."

"Yeou shall."

CHAPTER XXI.

UNCLE JOSHUA IN NEW YORK.

There were so many things for Uncle Joshua to do before he could get away from the farm, that the visitors decided to go on to the White Mountains and so home, leaving him to follow them to the city.

To the old man, whose farthest journey from home had been to Boston, the visit to New York was an event of no little importance. He arranged his affairs with as much care as Captain Cook might have done before setting out on his voyage around the world.

He had intended to go alone, and then, after consideration had led him to ask Aunt Tilda to go with him. And finally, when they were ready, who should come up to the house, one day, but old Cy Prime, who had been quietly making his preparations, in order that he might strike grief to the heart of his detested rival, Seth Perkins, by making the grand tour with Tilda.

Joshua at first refused to have Cy go, on the ground that he was so reckless and would be such a care to him; but Cy pleaded so successfully that at last he consented, and some three weeks after the visit of Happy Jack, all three of them started for New York.

All of Swanzey turned out to see them off, and the older folks shook their heads in melancholy expectation of the

result of such a daring undertaking. But even if Joshua had seen these foreboding signs, they would not have affected him, for he had one quality which had stood him in good stead in all the critical situations of his life—absolute confidence in himself.

He tried always to do right, according to his notion of it. He was perfectly free from self-consciousness; and he was as generous in his feelings as he was direct and simple in his manner.

Aunt Tilda was a great deal more concerned than he for the appearance they should make in the city among the rich Hopkins folks, and she did a vast amount of what Joshua called fussin' before she would consent to start. But when at last they did go off, no one was better satisfied than she that they would present a creditable appearance.

And Cyrus, stimulated by Aunt Tilda's discourses on the subject of dress, had bought outright, or had made by his sister Betsy, so many and so giddy articles of wearing apparel, that he modestly refused to wear his best before the good people of Swanzey, lest they should think he had turned into what they had often heard of in late years, but had never seen—a dude.

Aunt Tilda had once been in Boston, but Cyrus had never been even that far away from Swanzey; so that Joshua, who had been several times in Boston, was an authority on the subject of travel. And his recklessness at times made his two companions fear that some accident would surely happen to him before they could get him safely to their destination.

Cyrus, after more than one nervous remonstrance, reminded him reproachfully that he had objected to taking him, Cyrus, on the ground that he would be reckless; and here was he now endangering life, limb, and their happiness by his maneuvers.

The fact was that neither Cyrus nor Tilda dared to stir from their seats lest they should meet with some accident; whereas Joshua, feeling the importance of being an experienced traveler, would get off the cars at almost every stop. He would walk along the platform to the window where Tilda sat, and there converse with her. The agonies she suffered only a nervous person who has traveled but little can comprehend.

However, Joshua did reach New York with them, and

early in the afternoon they stood in the Grand Central Depot, each with an old-fashioned carpet-bag in hand, and each wondering which way to turn. It devolved on Joshua to lead the way, and, although he knew no more than they, he undertook to do it.

He had no little trouble in getting his trunk. He espied it being taken from the baggage-car, and would have helped himself to it had not the man guarding it told him he must let it go to the baggage-room first. This struck Joshua as a rather suspicious proceeding, and he therefore refused to lose sight of his trunk until it was delivered to him over the counter of the baggage-room.

Even then a man asked him to let him send it to him; but Joshua was not to be fooled so easily.

"I guess not," he said, with a shrewd twinkle of his eye. "Cy an' me can carry it. 'Tain't so all-fired heavy."

And so he and Cyrus took between them the old leather trunk, covered with moth-eaten patches of hair, and with the family umbrella tied to it by means of a piece of rope, and walked triumphantly out of the depot, Aunt Tilda following with a bewildered notion that if she lost sight of them she would become the instant victim of some dire city machination.

The most obvious way to go was to follow the car-tracks that ran out of the depot, and Joshua did so with a promptness that inspired his companions with an instant confidence. But when the way led them into the long tunnel under Park avenue, Tilda became alarmed and was certain they had made a mistake.

Uncle Joshua, however, would not turn back, though he was not a little surprised and startled at the length of time it took them to get out. And when at last they did reach the other end, he put the trunk down and told Tilda to sit down on it and rest herself.

"Gosh!" he said, looking back into the tunnel, "that's the longest covered bridge ever I see."

"Haow air we goin' to find Henry Hopkins? That's what I want to know," said Aunt Tilda, from the trunk.

"Ask. I guess everybody knows him. Come on, Cy! Take holt. Get up, Tildy. We will ask at the big house yonder."

It was the Park Avenue Hotel to which Joshua led them.

He left them out on the sidewalk while he went in and walked up to the desk.

"I want to know," stranger——" he began, when the clerk broke in peremptorily:

"Don't want any potatoes." And then, as Uncle Josh indignantly attempted to explain, he said, still more abruptly, "No, we don't want any butter nor eggs. This isn't the place. Go around to the side"—waving his hand—"and see the steward."

Joshua stared a moment; but, not wishing to display too much ignorance, turned and walked out to where his companions waited for him.

"Thought I wanted to sell potatoes," he said indignantly to them.

"What did yeou say anything 'baout potatoes for?" demanded Tilda.

"I didn't."

"What made him, then?"

"Don't know. Come on an' see this Mr. Stewart he tells about," and the old man went around to the kitchen entrance to the hotel and asked for Mr. Stewart.

The man of whom he asked wore a white apron and a paper cap. He looked at Uncle Joshua for a moment, and then said as the clerk had done:

"We don't want any more potatoes.

"I didn't say ye did," returned Joshua, testily, beginning to think some joke was being perpetrated at his expense. "I ain't got no potatoes to sell. I want to know where Henry Hopkins lives."

"Henry Hopkins? Don't know him. Who is he?"

"Who is he? Why, he lives here."

"Here? Then why don't you go to the office, around front?"

"I did, an' he sent me here."

"Well, I don't know any Henry Hopkins. Why don't you look in the directory?"

"What's that?"

"You can get one in any drug store."

"Look here, stranger, it's 'baout time yeou stopped this. We ain't none on us sick, an' don't want anything from the drug store. If yeou don't know where Henry lives that's all right."

He turned to take hold of the trunk again, when the man laughingly stopped him.

"You don't understand me. At the drug stores, generally, they keep directories in which are the names of all the people who live in the city, and where they live."

"I want to know," said Joshua, turning round again.

"You go into the first drug store you come to and ask for a directory, and you will find the man you want in it."

"Thank yeou."

"Welcome. Go right up this street till you come to Broadway. You'll see a drug store near the corner."

They went as directed and had no difficulty in finding Broadway. The crowds there surprised but did not abash our honest friends, who, as unconcernedly as if they had been walking on one of their own roads at Swanzey, carried their old trunk along the crowded thoroughfare until they came to a drug store, when Joshua went inside to ask for the directory while Aunt Tilda and Cyrus beguiled the time by looking in at the window of a store, taking care never to unloose their hold upon any of their possessions.

"A man told me," said Joshua, to one of the clerks, "that I could get a directory here."

"Certainly. Here it is."

And the clerk pushed the book toward Joshua.

"I want to find Henry Hopkins."

The clerk smiled, and waited on another customer. Joshua, seeing that he was expected to look in the book, took out his great bowed spectacles and adjusted them, unconscious of the amused smiles of customers and clerks alike. He opened the book at the beginning and ran his finger down the page. He carefully ran over several pages in this way. Then he looked up and the perspiration was rolling down his face.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed, in an audible tone, "I wonder where Henry is."

"If he lives in the city, he must be in the directory," said one of the clerks, pleasantly.

Uncle Joshua turned over the big book in his hand, and said, dejectedly:

"Seems to me I might as well look for a needle in a haystack."

"What's the name?" asked the clerk.

"Hopkins—Henry Hopkins. Like's not yeou know him."

"No," said the clerk, "but if he's in the directory, I wll find him for you."

"Now, that's neighborly."

"Why, you were looking in the A's. You want to look under Ho."

"Gosh! So I ought. Jest like a dictionary," said Joshua.

"Henry Hopkins, banker. House, — Fifth avenue," read the clerk.

"Hi gun! That's him! Write that down on a piece of paper, young man, will ye?"

The obliging clerk did so, and Joshua, after thanking him, and inviting him to step in and see him any time he was down Swanzey way, went out to where Aunt Tilda and Cyrus were standing looking in through the door at him.

"Come along," he said. "We'll find him naow. Hold on a minit. Here, Til, take my coat. It's all fired hot here, ain't it? Take yourn off, too, Cy. Til will carry them for us, won't you, Til?"

"Sartain."

So Cyrus took off his coat, and the two men, in the comfort of shirt sleeves, took up the trunk again, and started down Broadway. The clerk had given Joshua hasty directions for finding the house; but Joshua, in the excitement of stopping at every window of unusual attractions, forgot them, and was down by the Fifth Avenue Hotel before he knew he had passed the street at which he should have turned down.

He knew he must be astray somehow, but that did not trouble him greatly, for he had faith that he could find out again by asking, and so, as he was tired, and Tilda and Cyrus were tired, too, he proposed that they should sit down on the step in front of the hotel door, and rest.

Cyrus was more glad of the rest than he would have cared to confess; but now that they were seated, he admitted that his boots, which were new, had been hurting him for some time.

Joshua took some nut-cakes out of his carpet-bag, and passed them around, and they sat there contentedly, eating, moving now to this side, and now to that, to let the stream of persons in or out of the hotel.

"Must be a protracted meetin' goin' on here, I guess,"

said Joshua, as he shifted his seat for the hundredth time.

"Ya-as." assented Cyrus, tugging at his boot, which had begun to cause him excruciating pain since he had sat down. "I say, Joshu-a, help me off with this plaguey boot, will ye? It's hurtin' like smoke!"

Joshua obligingly stood up, and turning his back, made of himself a bootjack for Cyrus, and the torturing boot was pulled off.

They made rather a striking picture as they sat there, eating nut-cakes, in their shirt sleeves, and with Cyrus nursing his foot; but none of them cared how much the passers-by laughed. They were unconscious of being mirthful objects.

When they were sufficiently rested, Cy put on his boot again, and, inquiring at a near drug store for the direction to the house, Joshua led them across the street into Fifth avenue.

It was only necessary now to read the numbers on the houses, and this they did for several blocks, running up and down stoops innumerable in order to do so. They reached the right house finally, and, with a sigh of mingled fatigue and relief, they dropped the trunk on the upper step, and rang the bell.

CHAPTER XXII.

TWO OLD FRIENDS.

Years ago Henry Hopkins had left Swanzey a poor farmer's boy. Besides his homely suit of homespun, he had nothing but his honesty and industry to take with him. He had been successful, as so many country boys have been, in the great metropolis, which almost seems to reserve its greatest rewards for farm-bred lads.

But it is only seeming; for only those who are successful are heard from. The countless numbers who go to ruin, or sink into obscurity, are never paraded for the benefit of the ambitious or discontented, and the successful stand like luring monuments to the straining eyes of the country boy, whose often hard life leads him to look upon the possession of money as the one worthy aim in life.

If the boy who disdains the plow could but be brought to see into the minds of those who have gone away from

home and have attained the object of their ambition, he would see, for the most part, that the real happiness of those successful lives lay in the memories of the days when the city was an unknown place.

Henry Hopkins had been one of the favored ones of Dame Fortune. He had amassed riches until he was ranked as a millionaire; he had a palace to live in, and was surrounded by every luxury within the reach of wealth.

Like all so-called self-made men, he was over-conscious of the advantages of being the possessor of great wealth; but underneath a somewhat overdone ceremoniousness of manner beat a kindly, generous heart, and one which had no false shame of the days and companions of his rustic boyhood.

His son and daughter had told him that he might expect to see Uncle Joshua at any time, and he was looking forward to the visit with a pleasure little short of boyish.

Perhaps Mrs. Hopkins, who had also come from Swanzev, was less eager than her husband to renew the acquaintances of her youth; but even she was ready to welcome them, though she would have been glad had she known exactly when to expect them, in order that she might have so arranged her social affairs that there would be no danger of any distressing contretemps by reason of her fashionable friends coming in contact with her country visitors.

As it happened, none of the family was at home on the afternoon when our old friends rang at the door bell of the elegant mansion. A footman, who by the splendor of his clothes, reflected as much as a footman might, the importance of his master, opened the door to them.

Joshua bowed low at the sight of so much splendor, and his sister and Cyrus followed his example. The man looked as if he was not quite certain whether or not this was a new way of putting a slight upon him.

"Does Henry Hopkins live here?" demanded Joshua.

"Yis, sir."

"It's all right, Til. Come along, Cy." And Joshua, without any other word of explanation, was for making his way into the house.

The man barred the way as politely as he could, but effectually, nevertheless, and said:

"Mr. Hopkins is not at home."

"Don't matter, so long as he lives here," said Joshua. "Air yeou one o' his friends?"

"Sure, I'm the footman," was the somewhat lofty answer.

"Gosh! I want to know! Is that the reason yeou wear yeour trousers gallussed up so high?" asked Joshua, referring to the knee breeches which the man wore as a badge of office.

"I thought he was a foreign lord," whispered Cyrus, audibly.

"Sure, if it's game you're wantin' to make of me," said the man, indignantly, "yees can stay outside until the master comes." And he shut the door in the faces of the visitors.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Aunt Tilda.

"Mad, I guess," said Joshua, serenely. "Wa-al, it don't matter; we can set right daown here an' wait for Henry. Like's not he'll be right along."

This was quite satisfactory to Tilda and Cyrus, who looked upon the matter as inhospitable, but probably characteristic of city ways, and the latter, glad of another opportunity to get off the painful boot, withdrew it, with Joshua's assistance, and sat contentedly there. The supply of nut-cakes was unfailling, and it was called on again; and the trio was sitting in comfort, if not in absolute contentment, when a carriage drove up to the door and a young lady and a young gentleman alighted from it. Both stared for a moment as they looked up at the party on the stoop; but both sprang eagerly forward as Joshua rose up and shouted:

"Hi gun! I'm glad to see ye."

Cyrus hurriedly pulled on his boot as the brother and sister—for the two were Frank and Annie Hopkins—ran up the steps, the former inquiring wonderingly:

"Why, what are you doing here? Why didn't you go into the house?"

"Had some sort o' misunderstandin' with that highty-tighty chap with the red trousers, an' we sot down aabout here to wait. How be yeou?"

Miss Annie kissed and otherwise warmly welcomed Aunt Tilda, and there was a hearty hand-shaking all around. None of them gave a further thought to the footman, who, however, was trembling in his shoes at the sight of his young

master and mistress so joyfully greeting the guests he had treated so cavalierly.

He had been watching the three as they sat on the stoop, and had opened the door as soon as he saw the carriage drive up. He had expected a scene of a different kind. When he saw that he had made a mistake, he hastened to make his peace with Joshua, by officiously offering to carry his trunk for him, to the surprise of the young people, who had never known him to descend from his lofty pedestal to perform so menial a service before.

They went into the reception-room, where the young people plied their visitors with questions, which elicited the story of their search for the house—a story which Joshua told with a quaint humor which indicated that the situation had been appreciated even by him, in the broader if not in the more delicate shades of it.

"You must be tired," said Frank. "Come right up to your room, won't you? Annie, you will show Aunt Tilda to her room, won't you? Come along, Uncle Josh."

"See here, Frank; don't put me too high up, will yeou?" asked Uncle Josh. "I'm a leetle mite afraid of fire, an' I ain't no hand to shin down a lightnin'-rod."

"You are to sleep just up stairs, Uncle Josh, and Mr. Prime—"

"He'll sleep with me, an' if he kicks I'll make him sleep on the floor. He's kind o' frisky, Cy is, an' I'd like to have him where I can keep my eye on him."

"Just as you say, Uncle Josh," answered Frank, with a laugh; "but we could give him a room by himself if he would prefer it."

Cyrus had a decided preference for being in the same room with Joshua, however, and they were led up stairs to the next floor and into a room so much more magnificent than anything either of them had ever seen before that Frank had some difficulty in persuading them that the bed was really to sleep upon. Joshua looked at the lace pillow-shams and spread, and declared he could never sleep under a thing like that.

"But yeou needn't worry about me," he said. "Cy an' me'll rig up some sort o' bed on the floor."

Frank laughingly explained the use of the shams, and then staid with the visitors until they had washed and arranged themselves in their best to do honor to their city

hosts; and Cyrus, at least, was a marvel of Swanzey art. Joshua had the good sense to attempt nothing in the way of personal adornment beyond what he had been accustomed to every Sunday at home.

By the time they were ready to go down, Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins had returned and were waiting for their guests in the reception-room. As Joshua entered the room, Henry Hopkins stepped forward with outstretched hand, exclaiming:

"Joshua, how are you?"

Joshua looked at him with a beaming smile.

"Yeou ain't Henry Hopkins?"

"Yes."

"Hank Hopkins?"

"Yes."

"Red-headed Hank?"

The two old men laughed in happy unison at the recollections recalled by the boyish name, and shook hands with a warmth that melted away all the crust of formality, which a less natural person than Uncle Joshua, under such circumstances, would have been likely to foster."

"This is my wife," said Mr. Hopkins, turning to that lady. "You must remember her."

"How do, marm? Le'me see. You was a Richardson, wa'n't you?"

She could not yield as easily as her husband to the old man's genial warmth, but she smiled graciously, and admitted that she was a Richardson.

"Betsy Richardson?"

"Elizabeth Richardson," corrected the lady, in her dignified way.

"Ya-as, I remember; we used to call you Beta for short. I can remember the first time I ever see yeou, jest as well as if 'twas yesterday."

"Indeed?" frigidly.

"Yes, yeou drove daown to the store on a load of wood, with yeour father. I'll never forgit how purty yeou looked that day"—Mrs. Hopkins smiled graciously—"in yeour new caliker frock an' sun-bonnet, an' yeour blue yarn stockings hangin' daown over the side of the load of maple."

Blue yarn stockings! The elegant Mrs. Hopkins had forgotten there were such things, and it was wonderful how indignant the recollection of them made her. She turned

away from the old man, with an expression of supreme disgust on her face, which was in no wise modified by the sudden outburst of hearty laughter from her husband, who entered into the humor of the situation with keen appreciation.

"He didn't seem half so funny in the country," whispered Annie, who had come down with Aunt Tilda in time to hear Uncle Josh's speech.

And indeed it was singular to see how strangely altered the old man looked, when, in fact, the only difference was in his surroundings. He was like a jewel badly set, and only those who had seen him in the midst of his familiar country scenes could have realized how sweet and wholesome he really was.

It was fortunate for Mrs. Hopkins' reputation as a hostess that Aunt Tilda was there to take her attention, for it is doubtful if she could have forgiven many more such recollections as that of the blue yarn stockings. Frank, who was a privileged person, as an only son generally is, whispered in her ear:

"We wanted to surprise you with early recollections."

"You have been entirely successful," she answered, with some resentment.

However, what with Aunt Tilda to turn the current of her disturbed thoughts, together with the absence of Joshua and Cyrus, who had been taken by Mr. Hopkins to see the stable, there were no more unpleasant recollections brought forward, and the time passed serenely enough until dinner was announced.

It was no more than might have been expected that the country-bred folks would find themselves a little abroad when it came to eating their first course dinner. Aunt Tilda and Cyrus, afraid of exposing their ignorance, passed a miserable hour, trying to avoid the mistakes which Joshua made, and laughed at as heartily afterward as his host, for, with a true appreciation of his old playmate, Henry Hopkins knew that laughter without ridicule would never offend him.

Indeed, Joshua's own sense of humor was too keen to permit him to let his own mistakes go by without some sharp comment, oftener far funnier than any blunder he could be guilty of. He felt something like a boy let loose from

school, and determined to cram all the fun possible into his vacation.

And his spirit infected his old friend so that his family could with difficulty recognize the sedate banker in the hilarious old gentleman whose uproarious laughter fairly made the glasses ring.

The dinner was fittingly brought to a close by Joshua drinking the scented water from his finger-bowl. And when his host pointed out that the use of the vessel was to wash the mouth and hands in, he exclaimed in his candid fashion:

"I want to know! I washed afore I came daown stairs."

From the table they went to the drawing-room, the splendor of which almost deprived Joshua of the power of speech. He could hardly be persuaded to sit on the satin-covered chairs, and finally when he did sit down, bounded up again as if he had been hurt.

"What's the matter?" demanded Henry Hopkins.

Joshua felt of the soft, springy cushion, and answered, naively:

"Gosh! I thought I'd sot on the cat."

Mr. Hopkins laughed with all the zest of a boy, and drew Joshua down beside him on a lounge. Frank, divining that his father would like to talk over old times with Joshua, led the others away on a tour of the house.

Left to themselves, the two old friends sat for some moments in silence, the memory of by-gone days flooding the minds of both with recollections in which sadness mingled with happiness. But there was little room in Joshua's wholesome nature for sadness, and the very first question of his host brought out an answer that started the peals of laughter again. They fell into reminiscences, and talked of the people they had known and the things they had done, and any one to have seen them would have supposed them two boys masquerading in the guise of old age.

"Are the Peterson boys all living?" asked Henry.

"All living but Bill, and I guess he'd 'a' been if he'd staid at home. Bill allus was of a rovin' turn o' mind, an' he took a fancy an' went out West someres—out to Montany, I guess it was—an' he got tangled up with politics an' whisky an' a piece o' rope, an' it kind o' discouraged him a leetle mite, I guess."

Then followed a story about one Deuteronomy, who had

lost an eye in the war, and had it replaced with one of glass that did not fit, so that he was unable to shut the lids of that eye; in consequence of which he presented the singular spectacle, when he fell asleep in church one Sunday, of sleeping with one eye shut, and one wide open.

Then came the recollection of the first circus the two boys had ever gone to, the new roundabout suit Joshua had worn on that occasion, and the new hat Henry had worn, while Joshua had had to be content with the old straw one Tilda had braided him; and the forty-one cents Joshua had spent. And the two old boys simply rolled over on the lounge in uncontrollable glee as the memories carried them back to the careless, happy days.

But presently Henry fell upon the topic of Joshua's mother and her pride in him, and that brought to Joshua the thought which had been sedulously kept back all the time—his boy. And the tears came into his eyes as he told Henry how he had a boy in New York that very night, perhaps in distress and want. But Henry assured him that he should be found, and with a simple faith the good old man dried his eyes, and a little later asked that he might be allowed to go to bed so that he might be up early in the morning in order to set out on his search for Reuben.

"Yeou might as well leave a sassar o' taller along the fireplace," he said, as he and Cyrus took their leave. "I may want to grease my boots afore yeou get up in the morning."

Henry Hopkins laughed, but he did not think it worth while to tell Joshua that it was not the custom to grease boots in the city, intending that his guest's boots should be well polished before he arose in the morning.

It seemed quite late to the simple country folks when they said good-night, but it really was early for city people, and Mrs. Hopkins breathed more freely when they had left the drawing-room; for it had been her constant dread that some of her fashionable friends might come in, and be treated to some such story as that of the blue yarn stockings.

Miss Annie, seeing how her mother took the visit from the good people, whom she had learned to love and respect during her short sojourn in the country, took occasion to ask her father how he liked Uncle Joshua.

"He's a man, every inch of him, Annie, and I like a man wherever I meet him, or however he is dressed."

And Miss Annie felt satisfied.

It seemed as if the fates were rather in league against Mrs. Hopkins that night, for just as Judge Patterson and his daughter were announced, and she was congratulating herself on her good fortune in having got rid of the country guests, Uncle Joshua came walking into the drawing-room in his shirt sleeves, looking searchingly around on the floor, and quite oblivious of the presence of any strangers.

Mrs. Hopkins looked as if she was on the point of fainting, but Mr. Hopkins, without any sign of either embarrassment or chagrin, asked Joshua what he was looking for, while Frank and Annie, with a wit as kindly as it was ready, drew the judge and his daughter aside, and acquainted them with the facts of the case, so interesting the visitors that they insisted on an introduction, which was accorded.

Joshua shook hands without the least embarrassment, and asked, interestedly:

"Yeou ain't no relation to old John Patterson, that used to keep the soap factory at Chesterfield, be yeou?"

The judge laughingly assured him that he was not, and Mr. Hopkins again asked Joshua what he was looking for.

"The bootjack. There wan't any in my room. I helped Cy off with hisn, but mine come so all fired hard, I thought I'd get the bootjack."

"We don't keep a bootjack."

"How d'ye get yeour boots off, then?"

"Have them made to come off easily."

"That's suthin' our shoemaker never larned. Here, Henry, straddle that boot!"

And Joshua, to the amazement and indignation of Mrs. Hopkins, sat down in one of the chairs, preparatory to having her husband straddle his boot; but the chair chanced to be a fancy French rocker—a thing Joshua had never even dreamed of—and he had no sooner sat in it than it tilted forward, and he slid out upon the floor.

No wise discouraged by the irrepressible shout of laughter that broke out, but good-humoredly joining in it, Joshua essayed the chair again, throwing himself so far back this time that he tilted over backward, leading the laughter at its awkwardness, with so much good-nature, that even stately Mrs. Hopkins was won over to join the merriment.

Not disconcerted by his two failures, Joshua tried the unstable chair for the third time, declaring, as he balanced himself, that if the thing was his, he would put martingales

on it. Succëeding finally in balancing himself, he put his foot out, and once more invited Mr. Hopkins to straddle it. And the jovial banker, nearly doubled up with laughter, did so. Joshua rid himself of first one boot, and then the other in this way, and then, with a few jocular remarks, bade them all good-night, and retired to his room.

It was late enough for country folks to be in bed when Joshua and Cy retired, but it was early according to city notions; and therefore the two old men could hear the sound of voices in the drawing-room, when, in accordance with his usual custom, Joshua opened his door before getting into bed. The necessity of turning the gas down instead of blowing it out, had been impressed so strongly on Joshua, that he returned to the gas-burner several times after he had turned it out, to assure himself that it really had been done properly.

"Cy," he said, finally, as he put his head on the pillow.

"Ya-as, Joshua," answered Cyrus, sleepily.

"Don't forgit where the door is, in case o' fire. Ther' ain't many things I'm afraid on, but I am skittish 'bout fire."

"All right, Joshua."

With good consciences, good health, and no small share of fatigue, the two old men slept as soundly as children; and it is quite probable that they would not have waked until morning had not a sudden, and to everybody a dreaded sound, fallen upon the ear of Joshua, just about the time he had completed his first and soundest stage of slumber:

"Fire! Fire!"

Joshua started bolt upright in his bed, thinking he had been dreaming. But, no; there was the same awful word again ringing thrillingly through the still night.

"Cy!"

He bounded out of bed, dragging Cyrus after him.

"Git up, Cyrus," he yelled; and as the cry of fire again and again rang through the house, he and the hardly awakened Cyrus took it up lustily.

"Fire! Fire!" they yelled; and, by a sort of instinct, Joshua caught up one end of his trunk and started for the door, Cyrus following him.

There was evidently no time to lose, for they could see

that the flames had already penetrated the lower part of the house, for it was ablaze with light.

Still yelling fire, they ran for the stairs and flew down, the trunk bounding from step to step behind Joshua. Before they reached the hall below, the other members of the family came running into it, stimulating Joshua with the belief that it was on that floor.

"Fire! Fire!" he shouted. "Open the door! Open the door! Where's Til? Cy, take this trunk! I'm going for Til!"

And the old man hurled his trunk into the hall and started back up stairs for his sister, without having the faintest idea of where he should find her, when Frank Hopkins caught him by the skirt of his night-gown and held him.

"What's the matter, Uncle Josh? There isn't any fire."

But the old man was not to be so easily beguiled. He tried to pull his garment from Frank's hand, frantically yelling fire all the while.

"I tell you there isn't any fire, Uncle Josh. Is there, father?"

"There's no fire, Joshua," said the old man, who had, after the first surprise, been nearly convulsed with laughter. "Is there, Elizabeth?"

But his wife was not there to support him. She had indignantly retired to the drawing-room again, taking Miss Patterson and Miss Annie with her. The judge was there, however, and, as well as he could for laughing, he assured Joshua there was no danger at all.

Joshua still somewhat wildly insisted that he had heard somebody cry fire.

"It was I," laughed the judge.

"What did yeou do it for?"

"I was only singing a fireman's song."

"Gosh!" I guess I'll go to bed again," said the old man, joining in the laugh with ready good humor.

.CHAPTER XXIII.

JOSHUA'S FIRST DAY IN THE CITY.

Joshua slept soundly for the remainder of the night, but he awoke early in the morning. It was not only that he was always an early riser, but also that he had Reuben on

his mind, and could not lie abed. He did not disturb Cyrus, but dressed himself, and went down stairs at the first streak of dawn.

Not another soul was stirring, but he had no doubt he would find the saucer of tallow he had asked Henry to have put by the fire. His boots were new, and he wished to soften them.

He had little difficulty in finding his way into the basement part of the house, but it was too dark there to see anything, and therefore he threw open the shutters in the front room.

Almost as he did so a miserable-looking wretch shambled up to the window, and said something to him in a most woe-begone fashion. Joshua could not hear him through the closed window, and opened it.

"Will ye help a poor man, boss? I ain't had nothin' to eat since yesterday mornin'."

"Sho! I want to know?" exclaimed Joshua, sympathetically. "I'm only visiting here. It's Henry Hopkins' house, but I guess he wouldn't want me to turn nobody away hungry. Come in, an' I'll see what I can get. Nobody's up yet."

He went out to the door and opened it, and took the man in. He seated himself at the table, and then went into the kitchen and pantries and hunted for the food. He discovered it after some rummaging around, and took a cold roast of beef, a loaf of bread, and some butter into the other room.

He put them before the man, and cut him liberal slices. The man acted as if he could hardly recover from the surprise of such treatment, and was more than once at a loss for a reply to some of the questions Joshua put to him; but it was so evident, from the way he ate the food before him, that he had been hungry that Joshua had no cause to doubt anything he said.

The man ate his fill, surreptitiously conveyed a generous portion into his pockets, and then thanked Joshua with as much feeling as an irresistible inclination to leer at the old man would permit.

"You couldn't let me have ten cents to buy some medicine for my sick wife, could you, boss?" he asked, as a happy thought struck him.

Joshua gave the desired ten cents, and the man went

reluctantly away, as if he felt that he had not made the most of his opportunity.

With a comfortable sense of having begun the day with a kind action, Joshua searched for the saucer of tallow, which, even if it was not by the fire, he fully expected to find ready for his purpose somewhere in the kitchen. He was still hunting for it when he was attracted to the front room by a tapping on the window.

If such a thing were possible, there stood a man there more wretched than the one he had just fed. This time Uncle Josh did not need to ask what the man wanted; the expression of the face peering in was quite enough after his recent experience.

"Beats all how much sufferin' there is in these big cities," he muttered, as he went to the door. "Wa-al, want su'thing to eat, I s'pose," he said to the man.

"If you please, sir."

"Come right in an' set daown in the front room," he said.

He would have shut the door after the man, but before he could do so another man in the same condition of wretchedness put in an appearance, and commenced a long story of suffering in his own person, and on the part of a large family of small children.

Uncle Josh's heart was quite too soft to permit him to turn a deaf ear to the tale, and he admitted that man too. He sat the two men down as he had the first man, and was in the act of feeding them, when, one after another, three more applicants, each with a different list of troubles, put in an appearance.

The good old man, more than ever impressed with the misery to be found in a big city, and with his own boy in his mind, admitted them all and dealt out the contents of Henry Hopkins' larder with a generous hand, believing that he was doing his friend an actual service thereby.

He did not see the leering glances of recognition which the men cast upon each other as they came into the room. They gave proof in the way they attacked the food that they were hungry, and that was enough for him.

It was no little satisfaction to him to be able to relieve so much distress, and he watched the men devour the food, with a beaming smile mantling his ruddy, honest face. The men seemed to appreciate with whom they had to deal,

for they answered his questions in a vein of free romance, that was calculated to surprise as much as grieve him.

At first the men had been fairly modest in demeanor, but as their appetites became satisfied they grew freer and more at home, and talked in gruff tones to each other, indulging in the slang of their class, until what they said was as little intelligible to Joshua as if they had conversed in Greek.

In the meantime, the young woman whose part in life it was to see that the fire in the kitchen was in order for the operations of the cook, reluctantly aroused herself and wended her way to the lower regions of the house.

It seemed to her that she heard unwonted noises as she drew nearer to the basement floor, but she was conscious of not being fully awake, and she did not at once heed them; and then, too, a temporary lull in the conversation of the early birds beguiled her, and she had reached the lower hall before she was aware of what was taking place down there.

Indeed, she did not know what was actually taking place when she reached there, for she only looked long enough to see a lot of rough men sitting around the table, before she set up a frightful shriek, and turned and ran, still shrieking, up the stairs.

The men started up at the sudden noise, looked at each other inquiringly, and then with one accord grabbed at the food still remaining on the table and fled. Uncle Joshua simply stared at them.

Well, of course, the girl could not go screaming "thieves and murder" through the house without arousing everybody, and it had thoroughly dawned upon Uncle Joshua that he had been guilty of some indiscretion, before the men-servants, with Frank Hopkins at their head, rushed down to where he stood, looking a trifle foolish and awaiting the explanation of his folly.

Frank could do nothing but laugh at the old man's simple story, and the servants retired to their rooms to dress, wishing that Swanzey had never parted with its favorite citizen.

"Don't you see," said Frank, when Joshua had finished his story, "that the first fellow went out and told all his friends what had happened? That's why you had so many visitors."

"Gosh! I s'pose that's so. I'd sell aout cheap naow."

"Well, there wasn't any harm done, Uncle Josh; but if

you are going to stay in the city and go around looking for your son, you will have to bear in mind all the time that you can't believe one-half of what these beggars tell you. They have made a science of it, and know just how to play on your sympathies."

"Beats all, don't it? I'll take keer. I'm on the lookout for them confidence chaps; but I never thought o' these fellows lyin' so. If I was aout in Swanzey naow, I wouldn't a been took in like that."

Frank agreed readily that the old man would have been shrewd enough for the sharpest in his own home; but it was unmistakable that the newness of his present surroundings distorted all things in his sight. This was so certain that Frank concluded that since he was up he could not do a better thing in the interests of quiet than to dress and take charge of his guest until the day had fairly begun.

He remained with Joshua until breakfast time, teaching him some of the wisdom which every city boy is familiar with, and shocking the old man with the feeling of distrust which he seemed to have for every visible form of suffering.

"But ain't there no suffering in the city, then?" demanded the old man.

"Plenty, but you never find it except by accident. The deserving ones seldom ask for help."

"Must make city folks purty hard not to be able to believe any one," said the old man.

"I suppose it does; but here's father. He'll tell you that what I have said is pretty nearly true."

Henry Hopkins did indeed confirm all that Frank had told him, and during the day, as they wandered through the worse parts of the city, in the hope of accidentally coming on Reuben, the old man had more than one lesson in the school of simulated distress.

Indeed, the old man, during the several days that his friend accompanied him about the city, became painfully wise in the ways of the world—so wise, in fact, that he could be safely trusted to go about alone.

He insisted that Aunt Tilda and Cyrus should go about sight-seeing while he was devoting himself to the search for Reuben. He was not content with wandering about during the day, but every night, after dinner, he would set out and walk until he was foot-sore, seeing many a sad case of

young life ruined and adrift, and never failing to wonder sorrowfully if his Reuben had come to such a pass.

As might be supposed, the old man was not without his adventures. More than once he was accosted by some confidence man; but he was too honest to need to fear any of that fraternity. Indeed, those scoundrels would have but few victims did they seek their prey among honest folks, for the bait thrown out is almost invariably such as any honest person would shrink from.

Most of the old man's encounters had a ludicrous side, owing to the keen sense of humor which he possessed, and to that shrewd wit which, now that he had become familiar with the city, showed itself more plainly; but on one occasion, at least, he was an actor in a scene of pure pathos, in which there was but one touch of humor, and that was as grim as it was accidental.

In spite of all that he had seen and been told by his friends, the old man could never be brought to see a criminal or a willful fraud in a child. He always bought his paper of a child, if he was obliged to put himself out to do it. He never passed a little waif without at the very least a kindly smile, and more often with a kind word, and frequently enough with the gift of a small coin, if the child had nothing he could purchase.

It happened one evening, as he was sauntering through Franklin square, then almost deserted, that he heard the sound of a child sobbing. He looked around, and his eye fell upon a little bundle of rags huddled up near a railing surrounding a large building. He went over at once and asked:

"What's the matter? What yeou cryin' for?"

The child looked up shrinkingly, and hushed its sobs. Joshua put his hand on the little thing's head, and asked again:

"What is it, leetle gal?"

"Nothin'."

"Yes, yeou be cryin' for suthin', too. Tell me what it is."

The tone of the voice was so friendly, and the face looking down at her so kind, that the little thing lost her fear of him as a stranger, and sobbed pitifully:

"Mamma's so sick!"

"Sick, is she? Who don't yeou go home then?"

"He won't let me."

"Who won't let yeou?"

"Father."

"Why won't he? Tell me all about it."

He took her by the hand and lifted her up, and turned her so he could see her face. There was something so interesting in the child that he could not help questioning her; but the lessons of distrust that had been forced upon him presented themselves now, and he searched her young face as she answered his questions.

"Well, little one," he said, as she did not answer but looked up at him in a frightened way, "why won't yeour father let yeou go home?"

"He locked me out," she answered, in a whisper, as if afraid he might even there overhear her.

"What did he do that for?"

"He was—was drunk."

"An' he turned yeou aout, did he?"

"Yes, sir; but it isn't that. It's mamma. She's so sick!"

And the little thing broke down, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"There naow, don't ye cry," he sympathetically said, as he wiped the tears from his own eyes. "Tell me all about it. How did it happen?"

"I was all sold out with my papers, and went home soon, because mamma was so sick. I bought her an orange, because she wanted it, and took it home. She couldn't eat the orange, and wanted me to sing. I was singin' when he came in, an' he was mad 'cause I was singin'. He was awful drunk, an' he took all the money away, an' put me out, an' said I wasn't to come back to-night."

And the little thing wept in a hopeless sort of way, that appealed more strongly than anything else could have done to the old man.

"Show me where yeou live," he said.

She looked at him hesitatingly for a moment, and then, with her hand in his, led him away. He had not the slightest notion of where she was taking him, but he let her go on without a word.

She led him several blocks, and then turned into an alley-way which led to a dirty tenement-house in the rear

of another still dirtier. She went up one flight of stairs, and all the while trembling like an aspen, whispered:

"There's where I live."

She would have broken away from him then, and fled; but the old man detained her, saying kindly:

"He sha'n't hurt you, little gal. I won't let him."

She clung tremblingly to his hand while he knocked at the door. No answer came, and he knocked several times, each time louder.

"Maybe he's gone out," she eagerly whispered.

Uncle Joshua opened the door quietly and thrust his head inside. He could see nothing, for the room was quite dark. The little girl listened, and then said confidently:

"He's out."

She went in first and he followed. And if he had had any doubt of the genuineness of the child's story, he would have lost it the moment he heard her cry out:

"Mamma."

There was no answer, and he could see the little thing run toward the bed, dimly visible in the room.

"Mamma," she repeated, "it's your little Tot come back again. Mamma, wake up, won't you? It's Tot. He's gone out. Oh, she won't wake up. Maybe she's sicker."

The old man did not dare to speak. A feeling that something more than sleep had closed the ears to the plaintive cry crept over him, and he waited shudderingly for the little one to discover it.

"I'll light a light," said Tot, feeling around for a match, and presently striking one.

She lighted a candle which was stuck in a bottle, and as soon as the flame was bright enough Uncle Joshua could see how wretched the room was; and he could see, too, the silent form on the poor bed, covered only by a tattered sheet.

Little Tot ran over to the bed as soon as the candle was lighted, and tried again to arouse her mother. She called to her, she kissed her, she whispered coaxingly, and then there seemed a suspicion of the truth to flash into her brain, and she threw herself on the bed, crying:

"Mamma, mamma, mamma, don't you know your little

Tot? It's little Tot, mamma. Oh, why won't she wake up?"

She turned with such pitiful pleading to Uncle Joshua that the good old man turned his back and covered his face with his hands. He could not answer her. Tot looked from him to her mother, and then, with a choking sob, tried her last appeal. She sat there on the bed, and huddling close to the inanimate body, sang, with a heart-rending pathos, her mother's favorite song.

Joshua could bear it no longer. He went over to the child, and, with the honest tears of sympathy streaming down his cheeks, lifted her off the bed.

"She can't hear yeou, little one. She's gone where she's happier. Oh, don't ye take on like that, little one!"

She struggled gently from his arms and ran again to her mother. It was all clear to her now. She cast herself on the body and sobbed as if her little heart would break.

Joshua let his own tears flow unheeded, and after a moment of hesitation, knelt where he was, in the middle of room, and prayed silently.

He was still kneeling there when there came a noise of unsteady footsteps on the stairs, and a few seconds later the door was thrown open, and a man, cursing frightfully, and knocking the chairs over, staggered into the room.

Joshua turned his head at the intrusion, and seeing who it was and recognizing him as the husband of the woman, said nothing. He pointed to the bed, thinking that the sight there would sober the man; but instead of that he only uttered a dreadful oath and staggered toward it as if he would lay hands on the little girl.

Still Joshua said nothing; but all his wrath was aroused, and he sprang at the wretch and picked him up as if he had been a bundle of old rags. He carried him to the window and threw him out of it.

It was fortunate for the man that there was a shed under the window to break his fall, but Joshua knew nothing of it and cared nothing. He returned to the place and knelt again in prayer, which was not a whit the less fervent for having rid the room of the miserable cause of all the distress there before him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A CRUEL BLOW.

Joshua spent the remainder of that evening in seeing the undertaker, and in making arrangements for the funeral of the dead woman. The little girl would not be separated from her mother except by force, and so the old man paid a kind-hearted woman from one of the other rooms in the house to sit with her all night.

Nothing more was seen of the brutal father of the little thing, and when the funeral was over Uncle Joshua was much concerned at to the future of his *protegee*. The very kindness he had already shown her increased his interest in her, but more potent than that was the fact that she seemed to cling to him as to her only friend.

They were in the silent room together. She had been decently clad by his direction, and was sitting on a little stool at his feet, holding his hand as if afraid that he would leave her. He understood the feeling and it troubled him.

"What are yeou a-goin' to do now, Tot?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Ye ain't got no friends to go to?"

"No, sir."

He looked down at the thin, pale face, with its tear-stained cheeks and great, pathetic eyes, and there came a sharp tug at his heart-strings. How could he leave her now? He was the only friend she had; and thoughts of the wretched, outcast children he had seen swarming the streets filled his mind.

In spite of her hard training, she was an innocent, helpless little thing, and his honest heart shuddered at the thought of abandoning her to grow up into the kind of woman he had seen only too much of since he had been in the great city. He came to a sudden determination.

"How would yeou like to go home with me, Tot?"

"With you?"

The manner of the question, together with the look of joy that flushed over her face, was answer enough.

"Yeou'd like it, would yeou?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then come along. I guess Tildy'll say yes. I've told her abaout yeou, an' she felt bad enough. I live in the country, Tot, but it's a good home, an' a plaguey sight better place than this wicked city for anybody to grow up in. Come along. I don't know what Tildy will say, but I know it'll be all right, for she's got a kind heart."

With a touching confidence the little thing followed after him out of the dismal tenement where she had known only unhappiness, and the old man himself felt happier now that he had decided to take the child in his keeping.

There was nobody to ask him any questions, and he passed out of the alley almost unseen. Something attracted his attention as he turned into the street, and he looked toward it, but a sudden low cry of pain from Tot made him swing quickly around again.

A hurrying man had run into her and hurt her. He stopped at the cry, and was bending over her as Joshua looked around.

"Did I hurt yeou? Didn't mean to."

"Hi gun! Ben Eastman, what yeou doin' here?" cried Joshua, after a moment of speechless amazement.

"Uncle Josh, how be yeou?" said Ben, showing much less surprise than the old man.

"I thought you was in Boston," said Uncle Joshua.

"No, I've been here all the time."

"Heard Sue had gone away an' yeou was arter her. Found her?"

"Yes, an' lost her again."

"Want to know! I ain't found Rube yet, and I've most lost heart. Yeou ain't seen nothin' on him, have ye?"

"No," answered Ben, with an ugly frown, "I only wish I had."

"Thank ye kindly, Ben."

"Yeou don't need to thank me, Uncle Josh. 'Tain't no friendly feelin' that makes me wish it."

"What d'ye mean by that?" asked the old man, quickly.

"I didn't mean to say a word abaout it, Uncle Josh; but if yeou want to hear suthin' abaout Sue, and why I'm

here huntin' for her, come into this house with me an' I'll tell yeou."

"Does it concern my Rube?"

"Yes."

"Come, Tot! Go ahead, Ben!"

Ben led the way into the house where he had found Sue, and went up to the room that had once been Reuben's.

As he had told the old man, his first thought had been not to say anything to him about Reuben and his share in the disappearance of Sue; but a sudden second thought had moved him to do otherwise.

It was because of an indefinable something in Ben's manner that Joshua had followed him with so much promptness, and without asking any more questions on the street. As soon as they were in the room he turned to Ben and asked:

"Wa-al, what abaout Rube?"

"I'm sorry, Uncle Josh, to have to say anything to hurt yeour feelin's."

"Never mind that. Go on. What d'yeou know abaout Rube? Any kind o' news is better'n this onsartainty."

"I don't know where he is, Uncle Josh; but I want to tell yeou abaout him an' Sue."

"Him and Sue? What did he ever have to do with Sue?"

"Shall I tell yeou from the beginnin'?"

"Everything. Go on."

"Yeou knew he'd quarreled with Ruth afore he left Swanzey?"

"Ya-as. Heard tell on it arterward. Wa-al?"

"Wa-al, he quarreled account o' me. Was jealous o' me. There wasn't no cause. Ruth loved him, an' she'd refused me. He wouldn't believe that, an' hated me. I don't know if it was from hatin' me or not, but he made love to Sue by letter all the time he was away from Swanzey. Before, too, maybe. Then I found a letter from him that showed he'd been writin' to her, and tryin' to get her to run away. I came right on here, an' found Sue, but he was gone."

"She'd been with him?"

"Yes."

"She said so?"

"Yes; but if yeou don't believe her, there's a woman down stairs can tell yeou 'twas true."

"Married?" asked the old man, in a strained voice.

"No. He promised her, and then, when she was aout o' the house, ran away, an' she never see him again."

"'Tain't like Rube," said the old man, brokenly.

"That's it," answered Ben, a little bitterly; "'tain't like him. But I've got Sue's word for it, an' his own writin', and the woman down stairs that saw them both, an' nursed him afore she came."

"Nursed him! Was he sick?" cried the poor old man.

"I s'pose he must 'a been; but he was well enough to go when she came. There's some other feller mixed up in it. Looks to me like a plan to get her away from home, an' then desert her."

"Did Sue say he'd promised to marry her?"

"She said that was what she'd come here for. She said she had a right to be his wife, an' that she would be or die!"

"What did ye tell me this for, Ben?"

Ben looked at the old man, and was sorry that he had told him anything about it. Joshua sat in a chair, with little Tot sitting wonderingly by his side. He looked like a man who had been dealt a blow which had dazed him. He did not take it violently, but with a passiveness pitiful to see in him.

"I wish, naow, I hadn't told ye, Uncle Josh; but my idee was that mebbe yeou'd find Rube, an' if yeou knowed all abaout it yeou might make him marry Sue, an' save her good name. It's all she's got, Uncle Josh."

"Yes, Ben, yes. Let me think a mite. There ain't no doubt, Ben? He was never that sort, Ben."

"I wouldn't believed it myself if I hadn't had the proof. I'm sorry to make yeou feel so bad, Uncle Josh."

"Never mind abaout that. Tell me jest how it happened. Haow did yeou come to larn abaout it?"

"Abaout Sue, you mean?"

"Everything. I want to hear an' jedge for myself. If my boy's done wrong, an' I can help to set it right, I'm goin' to do it; but I ain't a-goin' to believe it till I must."

"Wa-al, at the first, when Sue went away, I didn't have no idee that Rube had anything to do with it; but when I asked Squire Stratton for advice, he said to hunt for some-

thing in her room to give me a clew. I did, an' I found a letter from Rube to her, all tore in bits. I put it together, an' found it was from him, an' so I came on here, an' got the police to help me find Sue."

"The police!"

"Ya-as; an' they found her in this room. Sue wa'n't in at first, an' we had time to find aout su'thin' from the woman down stairs. Then, when Sue came, I told her I knew everything, an' she up an' confessed that she'd come on to marry Rube, an' that he'd promised; an' then, when she was aout for a minister, leavin' him in here, sick, as she thought, he ran away. He took some of her money with him. She denied it at first, but I got it aout of her arterward."

"Where is Sue naow."

"Don't know. She said she wouldn't go 'home with me, so I offered to sell aout at Swanzey, an' take her an' father West some'eres. She said she wanted to find Rube, so I said I'd stay an' help her. She took this room, which was his'n, and I got a room daown stairs. We searched for a while, an' she got more an' more low sperited all the time; an' one mornin' when I came here she was gone, leavin' a note sayin' I'd never see her again, 'less she was Rube's wife."

"Got the note?"

"Sartin. Here it is."

He handed it to Joshua, who took it as if it was his own death-warrant.

"DEAR BEN," the note ran. "I know you mean to be kind, but I would rather be alone. You will never see me again except as Rube's wife. Let no one see this. Please go home. Sue."

The old man bowed his head sadly, and the tears ran down his cheeks. It was far worse to him to have to believe that his son was a scoundrel such as Ben's story made him, than to have found him dead.

"Oh, Rube, Rube, haow could ye do it?" he murmured.

Little Tot, who had been earnestly watching his face, put her little hand in his, saying, brokenly:

"Please don't cry."

"Thank ye, Tot; thank ye," said the old man, simply. Then he looked up with a flash of his old firmness. "Ben, I know yeou think there ain't any doubt; but I tell ye I

know that boy well. He never was perfect, but he wouldn't do a dishonorable act, I know. Let me see the woman down stairs. Let me talk with her. I know it must seem foolish to yeou; but, Ben, he was my boy. Oh, Rube, Rube!"

The old man's distress was so great that Ben wished heartily enough that he had not let his passion against the son lead him into so wounding the father. He went down stairs and presently returned with the woman who had nursed Rube before Sue came.

"Tell him what you know about the young man who was sick here, will yeou?"

"Sure it's not much I know."

"What was his name?" asked Joshua.

"Sure I never heard him say."

Joshua turned with a hopeful glance at Ben; but the latter only shook his head and showed him a hat which he had found in the room. It had Reuben Whitcomb written on the inside, in the handwriting of Reuben. The old man looked at the name, and asked, brokenly:

"Where did it come from, Ben?"

"I found it in this room. Was it the young man's hat?" he asked of the woman.

"It was."

"Wa-al, tell me all yeou know abaout him," said Joshua.

"I don't know where he kem from. He kem here one day with a fine-dressed gintleman an' tuk this room. He wint right to bed an' had the doctor twict ivry day. I used to set wid him whin the gintleman wasn't here."

"Was he very sick?"

"The doctor said he was, an' sure he looked it, he was that pale an' thin."

"How long ago was that?"

"A month sure."

"How long did he stay?"

"Tin days or somethin' loike it, I don't remimber exact."

"Was he well when he went away?"

"Sure I thought he was that sick he cudn't hold his head up. When the young lady kem he was out of his head an' the doctor said he must be quiet an' well nursed."

Ben had said nothing as yet, letting the old man pursue his own course; but now he said:

"What did the young lady tell yeou the first day she was here?"

"Whin she kem down stairs, is it?"

"Ya-as."

"Sure she axed me where she cud find a minister, an' I tould her."

"What did she say she wanted to have a minister for?"

"She tould me as she was goin' to marry the sick man."

"An' did she marry him?"

"How cud she, an' him gone? She kem back an' he was gone. She was crazy, an' wint around lukin' for him, but cudn't find him."

"How could he go away if he was as sick as yeou say?"

"Sure I don't know."

"What did the doctor say when he came again?"

"I've my money, anyhow," sez he, an' he wint away, an' I haven't set eyes on him from that day to this."

"Have yeou seen the gentleman who brought the sick man here?"

"No, sir."

Ben turned kindly to the old man, who had listened closely while he was asking the woman questions.

"Do yeou want to ask her anything further, Uncle Josh?"

"No; but I'd like to know what it all means. Do yeou know?"

The woman went down stairs again, and Ben turned reluctantly to Joshua and answered:

"Wa-al, I only know what the detective said."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know as it matters, Uncle Josh."

"Yes, it does matter. I want to know everything."

"Wa-al, the detective said he thought it was a plan to git Sue's money."

"Did Sue say they got it?"

"She said Rube had a part on it."

"Ben," said the old man, slowly, as he arose to his feet "yeou've got cause to think my Rube a rascal; but I can't b'lieve it till I have better proof. I'll stay in York naow till I find him. I won't go home till I do. An' if I find him an' find he's done what yeou think, an' what yeou've reason—good reason—to think, I'll have him marry Sue if she's to be found. I know a city like this is a bad place for

a boy like Rube; but I can't make it out so I can see it that Rube's sich a scoundrel as that. I can't do it, Ben. I did at first; but the more I think on it, the more I think it can't be true. I don't want to b'leeve it, Ben."

The old man's voice was husky and tremulous, and Ben had not the heart to combat him. He knew very well that Joshua would be as good as his word in respect to Reuben, and he could not ask any more than that. He felt that he had done all that could be done for Sue, and that there was nothing now but to find her and Reuben.

How hopeless a task that was he knew even better than Joshua, for having invoked the aid of the police so successfully once, he had done so again only to discover that the circumstances which at first had made it easy for them to trace Sue, no longer existed. They frankly told him that they could only trust to some accident.

Both Sue and Reuben had disappeared as if swallowed up, and not the faintest clew to either had been discovered. He had searched for them until he was weary in spirit and body; and now that he had met Joshua, and knew that he would prosecute the search, he felt that he might return home and take up the work which was being neglected in his absence.

"I ought to go home, Uncle Josh," he said.

"Sartain. Yeou've been gone a long while."

"But I'll come on here in a minit if yeou send me a telegram. If yeou find Sue, yeou'll let me know, will yeou?"

"Sartain. Yeou won't say nothin' 'baout this to Swanzey folks, will yeou, Ben?"

"Not a word."

"That's right, Ben. There may be a mistake some'eres, Ben, an' it won't hurt nobody if we're careful."

"I won't say a word, Uncle Josh."

CHAPTER XXV.

"THE WAY WITH YEOU WOMEN."

Quiet little Swanzey was excited; and with reason. Ben Eastman was home again after his long absence in search of his runaway cousin, Sue; and Cy Prime and Aunt Tilda had returned without Uncle Josh. And not only that, but they had brought with them a little girl from New York.

All Swanzey flocked to see the travelers. Few staid long with Ben, for he had returned singularly morose, for him, and had nothing to say of what had happened to him, beyond the fact that he had not found Sue.

Not so with Cyrus and Aunt Tilda. They had a great deal to say of what they had seen and experienced, and if Aunt Tilda had fewer marvelous adventures to relate, it was probably not because she had had fewer than Cyrus, but because she did not remember as well.

At any rate, Cyrus completely subdued his rival, Seth Perkins, when at the store he told his admiring listeners of the wonders of New York, the streets of which city he told over as glibly as if he was on the most familiar terms with them.

In saying that all Swanzey went to see the returned travelers, a reservation must be made. The one person Ben wished to have come to him staid away. Ruth went to see Aunt Tilda, and hoped to hear something about Reuben; but the good lady did not know even as much as Joshua, and so had nothing to tell. And Ruth wanted to see Ben, but she would not go to see him. She hoped he would call upon her.

But Ben felt that he could not go to her without telling her something about what had happened in the city; and, even if he had not promised Uncle Joshua, it was unlikely that he would distress her with the story then.

Several days passed, and Ruth's anxiety grew with the days. She nursed her impatience by specious reasoning about Sue, saying to herself that inasmuch as she was with Ben when he discovered where Sue might have gone, it was only natural and proper that she should know how far correct the suspicion engendered by the scraps of the letter was justified.

She tried to persuade herself that it was less to know Reuben's share in the matter than to learn what had become of Sue; for it was patent to her that Ben had not told anybody yet what had really happened in the city.

Each day she hoped that Ben would come to her; for she knew it would put her at a disadvantage to have to ask Ben what he had learned; and country girl though she was, she was woman enough to wish to have all the advantage that belongs to one who learns without asking.

But Ben did not come, and she could bear the suspense

no longer. She resolutely put on her hat one afternoon, and walked down the road toward Ben's farm. She hoped he would see her, and he did, as she walked along the road.

Perhaps the memory of that other day when he had waited for her to come up to him, that he might tell her of his love, came over both of them. It seemed so, for as he saw her coming down the road, he crossed the field to almost the spot where he had spoken to her before, and then suddenly avoided it and went farther down.

She must have noted the action and understood its meaning, for she flushed and looked pitifully at him, as if asking him not to judge too harshly.

She noticed how changed he was; how in place of the frank good humor which had always made his homely face so attractive, there was now a sort of hardness, a bitterness almost. And he noticed how different her face was from the happy, girlish one he had surprised that day a year and more ago.

"Glad to see you back, Ben," she said.

"Glad to get back, Ruth. I don't like the city; the country's good 'nough for me."

He had not meant it, but there seemed in this decidedly stated preference an allusion to Reuben's unwillingness to stay at home. He saw it as quickly as she did, and it made both uneasy.

"I suppose there are good people who live in the city," she said, sharply.

"Yes, I suppose so, but I didn't meet any."

A few months before he would have acknowledged that he had not meant what he had said, but in his present mood it was easier not to do so, and he spoke as if he had intended her to take it as she did.

There was an awkward pause after that, and Ruth wished most heartily that she had not come to see him. But the desire to hear more was overpowering, and though she thought she would not ask him to tell her, she waited, hoping that he would volunteer to do so.

Perhaps she even wished he would tell her in his present ungracious mood; but he did not intend to do so, and after a long hesitation, during which he was pulling the moss off some of the stones of the wall, and inwardly angry that he was so unkind to her, he said:

"Much obliged to ye, Ruth, for comin' over so often to see to father while I was gone."

"That was nothing. Ben, did you find Sue?"

There, it was said almost in spite of her. Ben carefully pounded a bit of moss into powder before he could make up his mind what to answer. He had said no to that question when anybody else had asked it. Should he do so now?"

"I couldn't stay no longer," he said, slowly; an' so I left somebody to keep on lookin' for her."

Ruth looked at him and weighed his words. Her face paled, and she said, in a low tone:

"I think I have a right to know, Ben. Did you find her?"

"Yes, I did," was the sudden and almost-defiant answer.

Ruth turned paler and looked at him, as if waiting; but as he did not say anything more, but continued to pound the moss into powder, she asked again:

"Why didn't she come home?"

"I suppose she didn't want to."

He still kept his eyes stubbornly bent on the moss he was powdering, and would not look up, though he knew Ruth was looking at him. She said nothing for a moment, but her brown eyes were filling and her full underlip trembling, as if her thoughts were painful.

"Ben——" she said at last, and there was such a pitiful tremor in her voice that he looked quickly up.

"Don't, Ruth," he exclaimed.

"I can't help it," she sobbed; "you are so unkind."

"I don't mean to be."

"Yes, you do. You know what I want to know and you won't tell me."

"Ya-as," he answered, slowly. "I s'pose I do know, an' I don't want to tell yeou, Ruth."

"But you will tell me?"

"An' yeou will hate me for it."

"I will not be unjust, Ben. You must know that. It is kind of you to want to spare me any unhappiness; but I have a right to know, Ben."

"Ya-as, I s'pose yeou have a right to know; but yeou will never forgive me for bein' the one to tell yeou."

"Don't say that again, but tell me."

"Ruth," he said, throwing the stone he held away, as if

he had made up his mind to something definite, "yeou know there's just one thing in all the world that I most want, an' that's yeour love. If I tell yeou what I've found aout in the city I know yeou'll never love me. Are yeou goin' to make me tell yeou, knowin' that?"

"It won't make any difference, Ben. I ought to know."

"Do you remember what yeou said before I went to the city? When we thought I was goin' to fin' Rube, an' help him if he needed it?"

"Yes."

"Yeou said yeou would try to love me if yeou was sure Rube didn't love yeou."

"Yes."

She spoke rather faintly than softly, and her face was very pale, though she was no longer weeping. His voice was raised a little, and he spoke earnestly.

"Then came Sue's leavin' an' the scraps o' letter."

"Yes."

"An' I said I hardly know what, now; but my feelin's toward Rube was changed."

"Yes."

"Well, if yeou was to keep yeour word, an' I was to benefit by Rube's disgrace, I'd feel mean, myself; but if I am the one to tell yeou 'baout Rube, you never will love me, an' I know it."

"I don't know, Ben. I do love him, Ben; but if he has done such a wicked thing, I won't be able to any more; but oh, Ben, it would break my heart!"

"Yes, an' I'd be the one to break it. You oughtn't to ask me, Ruth."

"But I must know."

"Let somebody else tell yeou."

"Who can?"

"Uncle Josh."

"Does he know? Does he believe it?" she cried, as if her last hope was being taken from her.

"I don't see how he can help believin'. I showed him all the proofs."

"I can't wait to see him. I couldn't have him tell me, anyhow. Won't you please tell me? I won't hold it against you, Ben."

Ben shrugged his shoulders hopelessly, and sought about for words to tell her what he had learned in the city.

"It's no use to tell yeou all about it," he said. "I found Sue right away. She had found Rube, and he had promised to marry her."

"Marry her?"

"Yes, marry her. He was sick in bed, or supposed to be, when she came; but after he had got some of her money, he sent her aout to find a minister, an' while she was gone, he got up an' ran away."

"Oh, Ben, it can't be true!"

"It is true. There was a woman in the house to prove it. He had a friend—a man who wore good clothes, the woman said—an' he disappeared the same day; nothin' seen o' either of 'em sence."

"But that would have been so wicked!"

"Ya-as, so it would."

"Did Sue tell you it was true?"

"She said he'd promised to marry her, an' then was gone when she came back. Yeou wouldn't a wanted any better proof than the poor girl's actions. She didn't say anything agen him. But that's the way with yeou women," he went on, bitterly, for he was hurt by Ruth's disinclination to believe the story. "Yeou are always willin' to excuse a man who does wrong."

"And aren't you too anxious to think him wrong?"

"I knew it would be so. Yeou see, yeou are angry with me naow,"

"Forgive me, Ben. Is that all?"

"I did what I could to get Sue to either come here with me or to go aout West; but she wouldn't."

"How good of you, Ben!"

He was pleased with her commendation, though he did not show it except by continuing in a milder tone:

"So I staid there to help her hunt for Rube—she was so sure he would marry her if she could find him—but instead o' findin' him, I lost her; for one day she was gone, an' I never see her again."

"And there was nothing more?"

"Only this note from her."

He took Sue's note from the inner pocket of his vest, and Ruth could not help thinking that he had it where he could

readily get at it. Poor fellow! he seemed to read her thought, for he said, hastily:

"It was just by accident I had it in my pocket."

She said nothing, but read the note carefully.

"Poor Sue!" was all she said as she handed the letter back.

"Yes, poor Sue!" he echoed, rather savagely.

"Thank you, Ben, for telling me."

"Yeou won't remember it agen me?"

"No. Good-evening, Ben."

"Good-by, Ruth. May I come to see yeou, Ruth?"

"Yes, if you want to."

She returned home with a saddened heart, and he looked after her until she was out of sight.

"If I want to," he murmured. "She said she would forgive me, but she won't. I don't think she believes it's his fault naow. She blames Sue mor'n she does him."

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

Uncle Joshua had no difficulty in persuading Aunt Tilda that it would be a good thing to take little Tot home to Swanzey, and he had still less difficulty in inducing her to go home with Cyrus; for the good lady had had a surfeit of sight-seeing, and was already yearning for the old kitchen at home.

She did not like to leave Joshua behind her, but she made no opposition to doing so when he pleaded that he could not give up the search for Reuben. He would not tell what made his heart so heavy, and she thought it was only discouragement at the failure of his efforts.

After she was gone, he haunted the neighborhood of Oliver street, thinking to be more likely to meet either Reuben or Sue there than in any other part of the city. His plan was to loiter about aimlessly, peering oftener into the liquor saloons than anywhere else, but looking into the faces of all the passers-by.

It was a weary way of spending his time, but, more particularly since he had heard Ben's story, it had not mattered much to the old man how the time went. On one par-

ticular night he was wandering about in this way, when a section of the Salvation Army came marching by.

It was the first time he had seen the blue-coated warriors, and he was gaping at them from the sidewalk, which was deserted except by himself, when around the corner swaggered a burly ruffian, of the genius known in New York as a "tough."

The man, whether purposely or not, swung into Uncle Joshua and nearly threw him into the gutter. And then, as if Joshua had been the aggressor, he turned in the bullying fashion of his class, and growled:

"What's the matter wid yer? Why don't yer take up the whole sidewalk?"

"There's plenty of room for both on us," said Uncle Joshua.

"What d'yer soy?"

"I say there's plenty o' room for both on us."

"Ah, what's de matter wid ye?"

And with no more ceremony the ruffian snatched the old man's hat off his head and threw it upon the sidewalk.

"Wa-al, I lasted longer'n I thought I should," said the old man, as he stooped and picked up the hat. "Expected to get scalped the fust thing. What did yeou do that for?" he demanded of the fellow.

"For fun, that's what for."

"Wa-al," said Joshua, whose anger had been rapidly rising to a boiling point, but whose manner was as deliberate as ever, "I don't mind yeour havin' a leetle fun, but I don't want yeou to have it all to yeourself."

As he spoke he struck the fellow's hat—it was of the white "stovepipe" order—from his head, and it rolled into the middle of the street.

For a moment the fellow was so amazed at the audacity of the old man that he was speechless and motionless; but the next instant he had recovered the use of his tongue and limbs, and had rushed at Joshua as if he would annihilate him, at the same time giving utterance to a string of threats, mingled with a choice variety of oaths.

The two men grappled, but Joshua not proving the easy victim the fellow had expected, he sprang back and picked his hat up saying:

"Look here, old man, if you wasn't so old I'd come over there an' wipe up the sidewalk with you."

"Come right along. I'm waiting for ye," and the old man indulged in a little posturing which he confidently believed was in the highest degree scientific, but which, in fact, looked like a species of war-dance.

Whatever it was it was exasperating to the witness, and he started once more toward Uncle Joshua, who prepared to receive him.

"Leave the old man alone. What's the matter with you?" demanded somebody behind Joshua, in the tone of a man who knew how to deal with such people.

The man stopped suddenly, looked at the new-comer, and with rather an access of ferocity, asked in his turn:

"Ah, what's de matter wid you?"

"Nothing's the matter with me; but there will be with you if you don't move on," said the other, easily. "There's a 'copper' coming this way, and I'll hand you over if you don't make yourself scarce."

"Yes, you will!" retorted the fellow, derisively; but he looked around, nevertheless, and seeing that a policeman was really coming toward them, he assumed the most impudent air he could, and with his hat well on one side walked off.

Joshua turned to thank his ally. He was a young man, well-dressed, and bearing himself with an air of easy assurance that seemed to say that he was able to hold his own in any sort of circumstances.

"Thank yeou!" said Joshua.

"Not at all. Why! am I mistaken!"

The young man stopped as he was passing Joshua, and stared at him.

Joshua, with recollections of gentlemanly confidence men fresh in his mind, drew back, and instinctively put his hand over his watch.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"It is!" cried the young man.

"How d'yeou know it is?" asked Joshua.

"My preserver!" exclaimed the young man, stepping forward.

"Sho!"

"You saved my life!" said the young man, cordially.

"Fust time I ever knew I was a life-preserver," said old Joshua, who was becoming annoyed.

The young man laughed heartily, but advanced a little nearer.

"Don't you know me?" he asked. "I saw you in Swanzey not more than a month ago."

"Now look here, Appetite Joe," said the old man, testily. "I've heard o' yeou before. I ain't so green as I look. Yeou'd better go look for squashes some'eres else. I read the papers."

Not at all disconcerted by the unflattering mistake of the old man, the young man said, laughingly:

"I can very soon prove to you that you and I have met before."

"That's what I'd like yeou to do."

"Do you remember giving a tramp some money and some good advice, about a month ago, at Swanzey?"

"Naow, haow did yeou know that?"

"I'm the tramp."

"Yeou git aout!" cried the old man, incredulously.

"I am; and I am more grateful to you than you will ever know. Now will you shake hands?"

He advanced again; but again Joshua, with an excess of caution, backed away, still holding his hand over his watch.

"Hold on a minute. Haow do I know you are the man?"

"I can tell you what you said to me."

"Let's hear it."

"You said, 'Go home and be somebody; it isn't too late yet.'"

"That's right. What did yeou say?"

"I said 'I'd try, and if I didn't succeed, I'd give old John Barleycorn the toughest scuffle for the underhold he'd ever had.'"

"That's what yeou said. There's my hand, an' I'm glad to see yeou."

Joshua shook hands with him, but it was not as heartily as might have been, for there was such a difference between this richly dressed young gentleman and the rough-looking tramp he had helped, that his suspicions were not all allayed.

Jack Hazzard seemed not to notice his manner, however, but took out his pocket-book, and taking a five-dollar bill from it, handed it to Joshua, saying:

"Let me return the money you loaned me, and please take my everlasting gratitude with it."

"There! Now I know it's yeou," cried old Joshua, taking the bill and at the same time shaking Jack's hand vigorously.

Jack laughed pleasantly, and asked:

"Come down to see Reuben, I suppose?"

"So I did; but haow did yeou know that?"

"How did I know? Hasn't he told you?"

"Hasn't who told me?"

"Reuben."

"I ain't seen him. Do yeou know where he is?"

"Why, yes. Or I did a few days ago. Come with me. It's not far from here."

A sudden suspicion flashed through the old man's brain.

"At 33 Oliver street?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"He ain't there."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know. Wish I did."

"You've been to the house? To No. 33."

"Ya-as, but he'd gone 'fore I got there."

"Doesn't Miss Eastman know where he is?"

"Who?"

"Miss Eastman—the young lady he is to marry."

"Naow, what d'yeou know about that?" exclaimed the old man, startled at what seemed like corroborative testimony of the perfidy of his son.

"She told me," answered Jack, with a puzzled expression.

"She did?"

"Yes, she did. Come, do not let us stand here. Let us go around to the house where he lived, and talk as we go. There is evidently some mystery here."

"That's jest what there is. What's yeour name, naow that yeou're yourself?"

"Jack Hazzard," was the laughing response.

"Wa-al, Jack, I wish yeou'd tell me all yeou know 'bout my boy, Rube."

"I will, readily. I'll begin at the beginning, shall I?"

"Do."

"You will remember that night I left you with your five

dollars in my pocket, and a great many good resolutions in my heart?"

"Ya-as."

"Well, just after I left you, I was overtaken by a young woman—Miss Susan Eastman I discovered afterward—who said she had overheard what you and I had been talking about. She told me your son was to marry her; that he was in New York, probably in bad company; that she would do anything to have him found and helped. I was willing to do anything for you, and I offered to find him. She gave me his last address and said I was not to let anybody but herself know if I found him."

"What was that for?"

"She was afraid you might feel badly if you knew how reduced he was."

"I don't understand it."

"I don't either, now, though I had no reason to think there was anything odd in the matter then. However, I found your son. He was very ill indeed. I had him taken to the room you have seen. It was not a nice one, but it was near where I found him, and he was not fit to be moved farther. I wrote to Miss Eastman at once and she came on."

"Run away from her hum."

"Ran away! She told me you were too ill to come."

"Ain't been sick sence I had the measles," said the old man, indignantly. "Did Rube say anything?"

"He was too sick when she came, and I had no opportunity after she came to see them together, for I was called away to see my mother, who was away at the sea-shore, and who was very ill. I have only just returned, and was going to see how they had got along. I sent a note to Miss Eastman, telling her to go to my mother's lawyer for any money she might need. I wrote to him from the sea-side to give her what she asked for. I didn't worry about them, for I knew they could have no trouble."

"That was real kind o' yeou."

"That was nothing. And you say they are both gone?"

"Both on 'em. Fust he run away from her, and then she run away from her cousin who'd follered her up an' found her."

"Tell me all about it, will you?" asked Jack, as he continued walking instead of turning in at the house.

"Sartain."

And the old man did tell him of all that had happened, so far as he knew. Jack listened attentively, asked a few questions, and then, when Uncle Joshua was through, said:

"If the story you tell me is correct he must have left the house the day I saw him, for, you see, I am the person your friend thinks is your son's partner in his iniquitous scheme."

"Ya-as, o' course."

"But your son was no more able to get out of his bed and run away than I would be able to fly at this moment."

"But, accordin' to all stories, he did go away alone, an' that's what makes it look so bad."

"I don't comprehend it at all; but let's go to the house and see the woman I engaged to nurse Reuben before Miss Eastman came."

They went together to the house, and Jack interviewed the good woman without eliciting anything more than had already been known; but Jack had one more resource, which had not been available to the others—the doctor. He was at home and recognized Jack at once.

"You remember me?" said Jack.

"Certainly. How's the patient?"

"That's what I don't know. I went away one day to see my mother, and now, when I come back, I am told that he got up from his bed and went away alone. I don't understand it, and have come to you to help me."

"I don't know anything about the affair. I only know that I called, as agreed, and was told he had gone. I supposed you had taken him away, for reasons of your own; and as I had just been paid by you, I think my supposition was a natural one. Don't you?"

"Oh, yes; but what I don't comprehend is, how he could have dressed himself and walked away when he was so sick. Could he have done it?"

"Not in his right mind."

"Then he must have been helped away."

"Either that, or he became delirious, and did it alone."

"But I thought he was past that."

"He ought to have been, but a little carelessness would have thrown him back. Why don't you ask that young woman who came to nurse him? She ought to know something about it."

"Why?" demanded Jack, quickly.

"Well, she was nursing him and ought to know how he seemed, and, then, she may have talked too much to him. I remember she asked me very particularly if she might do so. I told her yes, not supposing she would say anything to disturb him. She may have done it. Have you talked with her?"

"She is gone, too."

"Ah! Then depend upon it she must have talked to him and tired him into a relapse. She didn't go off with him?"

"No."

"Then that is what happened."

"Could he have gone far?" asked Jack, reflectively.

"No. His strength would soon have been wasted."

"Could he have gone a block?"

"Not any more."

"Thank you."

Jack hurried Uncle Joshua away, saying as he reached the street:

"I have an idea. Will you stay with me while I follow it up, or will you go home?"

"I'll stay with you as long's there's any chance of findin' my boy."

Jack's first step was to return to Oliver street and find the policeman who was on that beat. The old man followed Jack without offering a word of suggestion or advice, so much was he impressed with Jack's energy and knowledge of the ways of the city.

"I want to ask you a few questions about a man I'm looking for," said Jack to the policeman.

"Oh, you do, eh?"

"Yes," answered Jack, slipping a dollar bill into the officer's hand, "and I'd be very much obliged if you would answer them."

"Certainly, sir. Of course," the officer exclaimed, with such a marked change of manner that Joshua stared at him.

Jack drew out his memorandum-book, and from it learned the exact date on which he had left the city to go to his mother. This he gave to the officer, and asked him if he knew who was on the beat on that date. The man calculated for a few moments, and answered:

"I was on it myself, in the day-time, that day,"

"Then you are the man I want to talk to. Do you remember seeing a man who seemed very sick that day, anywhere near 33 Oliver street?"

"Sick? What sort of a man was he?"

"About my height, and not very well dressed. He was very thin and pale, and must have been very weak.

"He might have looked as if he was drunk, maybe?"

"Yes, likely enough."

"Well, I dunno if it's the same man or not; but I think it was that day I found a man I thought was drunk, lyin' on the sidewalk. I tried to make him get up, an' then found he was sick. I thought he was dyin'. He seemed like it. I rung up an ambulance, an' he was taken to the City Hospital.

"Oh, my poor boy," groaned Joshua.

"Don't be cast down, old friend; we'll find him well and hearty, don't doubt it."

"I hope so; but maybe 'twant't him, anyhow."

"We must find that out. We will go directly to the hospital."

They did go, and, late as it then was, had no difficulty in obtaining access to the book in which were recorded the entries to the hospital. Jack turned the book over to the date in question and rapidly ran his eye over the page. Suddenly he put his finger on one line, and, after reading it to himself, pointed it out to Joshua.

"You see, there was an unknown man brought here that afternoon. He had brown eyes and hair, and his linen was marked 'R. W.'"

"Reuben Whitcomb! It's my boy! Thank the Lord for that!"

"But the record says he had ten dollars in his pocket, and Reuben had no money at all."

"Ben said he got some from Sue."

"Then it must be he." He turned to the man in charge.

"Can you tell us anything about this man?"

The man looked, and consulted another book.

"The man's name was Reuben Whitcomb——"

"Was?" cried Joshua.

"Yes; he was discharged a week ago."

"Well?" inquired Jack.

"Yes."

"And you have no idea where he is now?"

"Not the slightest."

"Was he real well, mister?" asked old Joshua, tremulously.

"Well, I s'pose he wasn't sick any more; but it ain't likely he was very strong. We can't keep 'em here till they're strong, you know."

"No, I s'pose not."

"Do you know," asked Jack, "whether or not he was allowed the money he had when he came in?"

"Yes, took it with him when he went away."

"You see, then," said Jack, turning with a hopeful tone to the old man, "there is no need to worry about him. He has money enough to get along with for at least a week, and we are certain to find him before that is gone by."

"D'ye think so, Jack?"

"Of course I do."

CHAPTER XXVII.

OH, MY BOY!

Perhaps Jack was not as confident as he said. But however that might be, he did not attempt to depend only on himself to find Reuben. He had too good a knowledge of the great city for that.

He hired a special detective; he informed the police, and offered a reward for information leading to his discovery; he advertised for him, and then took the field himself.

He would have had Joshua remain at home; but the old man was too anxious for that, and insisted on accompanying him wherever he went. And the knowledge which the old man obtained of the night side of New York during the days which followed gave him an abiding horror of the city.

Early each day he met Jack, and together they would make a round of some portion of the city, seldom separating until late at night.

"It's real kind o' yeon, Jack, to take so much trouble for an old man, like me," he said one night, gratefully.

"Not a word about that, Mr. Whitcomb. I owe you a mother's happiness and my own reformation, and I shall not consider the obligation discharged as long as life lasts."

After that the old man made no objection, but patiently

walked the streets, hoping each day and each hour of the day that they would find the lost boy.

Jack had no heart to tell him that the search they were making was a practically hopeless one, since the trained detective, and the ubiquitous policeman, could find no trace of Reuben; so he did what he could to keep the old man in heart, and took him to some new portion of the city each day.

One night they were wandering in one of the nearly deserted streets running into the Bowery, when from around the corner came a confusion of cries. Jack instinctively ran toward the corner, but the old man, more cautious, caught him by the sleeve, crying:

"Look out! Don't go too near, or yeou'll get stabbed!"

Jack laughed at the old man's fears, and stood listening. The noise was coming toward them, and he drew Joshua to one side. Presently around the corner staggered a drunken wretch, pursued by cries of derision, and occasionally being hit by a flying missile of some sort.

He answered his tormentors by drunken shouts, and, with his back toward our friends, staggered nearer. Presently he turned his head, and Joshua could distinguish his features. The old man fell back as if he had been struck a heavy blow; then he threw up his hands and rushed forward, wailing:

"It's my boy—it's Rube! Oh, my boy!"

Reuben gazed at him in a stupid, dazed fashion for a moment, and then would have fallen had not the old man caught him in his arms.

The shock of sudden recognition sobered Reuben, and he lay quite still, murmuring:

"Father, father!"

"Rube, Rube!" sobbed the old man.

A curious crowd would have gathered to look at the painful tableau; but, a policeman coming up, Jack enlisted his aid by means of a dollar bill, and the crowd was dispersed for the moment. Jack ran to the old man.

"Come, Mr. Whitcomb—come, Reuben! Let us go home at once. Lean on me, Reuben. You take him on the other side, Mr. Whitcomb."

They both obeyed him, and they were soon on the Bowery, where they attracted no more than a passing glance. At Chatham square they took a hack, and Jack gave the order

to drive to his house. They rode some time in silence. Then Joshua asked:

"Where are we goin'?"

"To my house," answered Jack.

"What for?"

"Reuben wouldn't like to go to Mr. Hopkins' house now."

"No," was all the old man said.

Reuben said nothing at all, but sat looking sadly at his father, who, he felt, must despise him.

The old man caught something of the pitiful shrinking of his boy, and, unable to speak lest he should break down, he suddenly put his arm around him in a way that told the whole story of forgiveness.

"I don't deserve it, father—I don't deserve it!" sobbed Reuben.

After that, nothing more was said until the house was reached, Jack respecting the feelings of father and son too much to break in upon them with any word of his. But when they were in the house, he said to Joshua.

"Would you like to talk with Reuben?"

"I s'pose so; yes."

"Let him go with me to my room first. It will be better."

"Jest as yeou say, Jack."

Jack led Reuben away, but returned alone a few minutes later, saying:

"I wanted him to eat something before talking with you. He wasn't fit to say anything in his previous condition."

"No, I s'pose not," answered the old man, with pathetic gentleness.

It seemed as if the shock of seeing his son as he had seen him could not be overcome.

"I'll leave you alone for a little while, and see that Reuben has what he needs."

And Jack considerably left the old man to struggle alone with his sorrow. Nearly half an hour later he returned, and said:

"Mr. Whitcomb, I want to say something to you about Reuben."

"From him?"

"No, sir; he doesn't know I am going to say a word to you."

"Go on."

"When I found Reuben first, he was very ill. He had been dissipated, but when I found him he had been trying to reform. When he left the hospital, a week or so ago, he was feeling weak and friendless, and foolishly went with a companion, who had left the hospital with him, to take a drink. He was so weak that the liquor went straight to his head, and the result was that he had no more control over himself, and he became what you saw. He needs pity and sympathy more than anything else."

"Thank yeou, Jack. Whatever he might need, he never would 'a got anything else but pity and sympathy from me. But I thank yeou for them words, Jack. I won't deny I feel purty bad, Jack, but the boy'll not know it if I can help it. What I care most for is abaout the gal—abaout Sue."

"I said nothing to him about that, sir. I thought it better to leave it to you. Only I don't believe he is a rascal."

"Thank yeou, Jack, thank yeou. Here he is naow."

Jack lingered long enough to see the old man's eyes light up with pleasure and to hear his exclamation of delight, and then left father and son alone together. With kindly shrewdness he had insisted on having Rube bathe, shave, and dress in clean linen and a suit of his clothing, knowing that the self-respect of the father, as well as that of the son, would be restored by the process.

And the result was as he had foreseen. Instead of the disreputable drunkard, whom he had rescued almost from the gutter, Joshua saw a well-dressed young man, whose most marked characteristic was a visible weakness resulting from his severe illness. The old man held out his arms.

"Reuben!" he cried.

And the two embraced each other, without too much shame on the one side or too much sorrow on the other.

"I have found yeou at last," said the old man.

"I wish you had found me some other way, father."

"Hush! Not a word about that. Jack's told me every-thing. Let by-gones be by-gones."

"Thank you, father; I don't deserve that you should be so kind."

"So far as the drink's concerned," said Joshua, anxious to have the disagreeable part of his task over, "it's all right; but I want to ask yeou what abaout Sue Eastman?"

"What do you know about her, father? Where is she?"

"What is she to you, Rube?"

"Nothing yet, but she was very good to me, and ran away from home to nurse me, and I promised to marry her to save her good name."

"Yeou did?"

"Yes. I can just remember that much, and I think I must have run away from my room while she was out. I don't know anything about it."

"That's it, then. But, Rube, had yeou wronged the gal?"

"Wronged her, father? No. How could you think it?"

"I didn't think it, Rube. I knew it couldn't be, no matter what Ben said."

"What did Ben say?" demanded Reuben.

The old man thereupon related to Reuben all that had taken place between Ben and himself, and it was not long before Reuben was as much mystified as his father had been. Nor could he clear up the mystery, and it is quite likely that they would have come to the conclusion that Ben was a villain, had they not had the happy thought to call in Jack to assist at their deliberations.

He heard all that they had to say, and then he told again what had happened to him; and by putting one thing and another together it became pretty clear that the cause of the trouble was Sue herself.

This conclusion being reached, the old man turned to Reuben with a beaming face, and demanded:

"Then what's to hender yeou goin' right home?"

"I'll go if you say so, father," answered Reuben, sadly.

"Why, what's the matter, Rube? Yeou want to go home, don't ye?"

"Yes, father, I want so much to go home that it seems as if I couldn't wait to get there; but if I go home with you folks will always say that I came here, and then you had to come after me to take me home. Besides——"

"Wa-al besides what?"

"Ruth."

"Ruth'll forgive yeou."

"I don't believe she loves me any more, father. I don't see how she can."

"Sho! Nonsense! She's that kind o' gal that'd keep on lovin' a fellow long arter he was wuth it."

"But she wouldn't respect me if I were to go home with you now."

The old man looked greatly disturbed. He turned to Jack.

"What d'yeou think, Jack?"

"I think he's right, Mr. Whitcomb. Let him stay with me. The debt I owe you I will pay to him. I am willing to promise for him that he will return home as soon as he feels that he can do so without loss of self-respect. Won't you, Reuben?"

"On my honor, I will. I'm not the man I was when I left you, father. I have had some needed lessons, and I hope I shall know how to profit by them. And if you are afraid that I will return to drinking, I will give you my promise not to touch a drop of liquor from this moment. I have already made the same promise to myself."

"That's right. I'm glad on it. When will yeou come home?"

"I'll be home on New Year's Day."

"There's my hand, Rube. I ain't afraid to trust ye."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FATHER AND THE RIVAL.

It really seemed as if Swanzey was a happier, cheerier place from the moment of Uncle Joshua's return to it. Certainly everybody greeted him with smiles, and more than one told him that the place had not seemed natural without him.

The day of his return was a busy one for Joshua, trying to take up the work of the farm as if he had never abandoned it, and seeing visitors almost every moment. Everybody asked after Reuben, and to each one he told almost tearfully, so great was his joy that he could do so, how Reuben was well and all right.

Perhaps the word that Reuben had been found and was doing as he should, reached Ben's ears and deterred him

from calling on the old man. At any rate he did not call, and the old man was so anxious to see him and tell him that Reuben had not been guilty of any wrong to Sue, that after supper he drove over to see Ben.

"He's over to Squire Stratton's," said Ben's father.

"Jest as well," said Joshua to himself. "I'm sorry for Rube if Ruth's given him up for Ben; but I can see that Rube gets justice to his good name, anyhow."

It was dusk when he reached the squire's, and he did not see anybody on the porch until some one called out:

"Is that you, Uncle Josh?"

"That's just who it is. Who be yeou?"

"Ruth Stratton."

"How be yeou, Ruth? I'm real glad to see yeou."

"And I'm glad to see yeou, Uncle Josh. Swanzey hasn't seemed like itself with you gone. Come up on the porch and sit down, won't you?"

"Thank you, but I want to see Ben Eastman fust. Came over to see him, 'cause I heard he was here."

"So he is; he's on the porch now."

She had come down the path and had shaken hands with him, and she said this in a low tone, and, somehow, it seemed to the old man, as if she did not like to admit it. His heart sank at the thought of Reuben's loss.

"Anybody else there?"

"No," was the soft answer.

"Then I'll go up."

"Do you want to see him alone?" she asked, timidly.

"Jest for a minit, if yeou don't care."

"Not at all."

She moved aside to let him pass, and then she put her hand on his arm, asking, in a whisper:

"Uncle Josh, did you find—Sue?"

He stopped and turned quickly.

"What d'yeou know about Sue?"

"Why—why—she ran away, you know."

"Has Ben Eastman been mean enough to tell yeou that passel o' lies abaout Rube?"

He had unconsciously raised his voice in the sudden heat of the moment, and before Ruth could reply, Ben had risen from his seat on the porch and answered at the same time that he walked down the garden path.

"Them's hard words, Uncle Josh; but I s'pose, bein' his

father, it's only nat'ral. Ruth knew afore I left here about Rube an' Sue."

"An' yeou told her after yeou came back, 'thout waitin' for me to get back, all yeou'd heard when yeou was in New York?"

"I asked him to tell me, Uncle Josh," interposed Ruth.

"He'd promised me he wouldn't say a word about it 'till I'd had a chance to find out if it was true."

"But I knew so much already, and I insisted on knowing. I even went to him to find out, because he wouldn't come to me. You mustn't blame him, Uncle Josh."

"'Twa'n't the straightforrad thing I'd expect from Ben Eastman," said Joshua, rather obstinately.

"Perhaps 'twa'n't," said Ben. "I didn't want to tell her; but I did, an' I ain't goin' to deny it. If it ain't true, I can take it back; if it's true, no harm ain't done."

"Wa-al, I've come to give yeou a chance to take it back. It ain't true."

"Have yeou found Sue, then?" asked Ben, eagerly.

"No, but I found Rube, an' he says it was mostly a mistake."

"Humph!" grunted Ben.

"Didn't Sue go to him in the city?" demanded Ruth, quickly.

"Ya-as, she did, but twa'n't none o' his doin's. She'd deceived him all along, writin' things that wa'n't so; and when she found him sick, she told him a passel more lies, an' then got him to promise to marry her."

"He must 'a been real sick when he could get up out o' bed an' run away from her," said Ben, sarcastically.

"He was sick," responded Uncle Josh, warmly. "He was so sick that she'd made him crazy with her talk o' Ruth, here, an' he got up an' dressed himself an' went out into the street. Folks thought he was drunk—ye needn't sneer like that, Ben Eastman. I know what yeou mean; but he wa'n't drunk no more'n I am naow. He was desperate sick, an' he fell daown in the streets an' was took to the hospital. I know that, for I went to the hospital after him."

"But he did promise to marry Sue," said Ben.

"So he did—he says so; but it was 'cause she'd deceived him."

"I want to hear Sue's story, fust," was Ben's dogged answer.

"Yeou can hear what yeou like!" exclaimed the old man. "Rube's innercent, an' that's all I care to know. What d'yeou say, Ruth?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think," sobbed Ruth.

"I thought yeou'd do the boy justice, anyhaow," cried the old man. "But I suppose I oughtn't to expect it."

"If I hadn't seen the letter myself, Uncle Josh, it would be different."

"Wa-al, I can't say no more. I'm satisfied he's innercent."

The matter was too near the old man's heart to permit him to be moderate about it, and he wheeled about and went away without another word, leaving Ruth and Ben standing alone in the garden path.

They stood in awkward silence for some moments, and then Ben said, gently:

"It was real good of yeou to stand up for Sue."

"I didn't mean to do that," she said, quickly. "If Reuben is wrong, I am sure she is more so. Anyhow, it isn't kind of you to say anything against him until you are sure."

Ben bit his lip and kept back the protest he would have liked to make, for he was beginning to learn that Ruth could be capricious. He knew that she was trying to be true to her promise to try to love him, and he knew that she was not succeeding very well. She permitted him to call upon her, and she always treated him civilly, but that seemed as far as she could bring herself to go.

He, in the meantime, showed her that he could be patient. He never resented any of her moods, but bore everything with a manly gentleness that could not but force her to admire him. Now he held his peace until he could say something he thought would not displease her.

"I shall not say anything to anybody abaout Rube," he ventured.

"Why should you?" she demanded.

"There's no reason, Ruth."

"I'm tired, Ben," she said, suddenly.

"Then I'll say good-night and go," he answered.

She let him go, and then she went to her room, and wept

almost as much as she had that night when Reuben had treated her so unjustly.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEN'S OPPORTUNITY.

During the months that followed there was no perceptible change in the relation of the various actors in the village drama toward each other, excepting that as Ben's visits to Ruth continued and became regular it was generally understood that they were to be married some day.

It was so commonly talked of that Joshua thought it best to prepare Reuben by telling him of it. He besought him not to be too much cast down about it, but to continue steadfast in his intention of returning home at the end of the year.

Reuben answered humbly enough that it was no more than right, and the old man did not suspect that his boy had secretly cherished the hope that some time he might feel himself worthy of the girl whose love he had thrown away.

Through the good offices of Jack Hazzard, whose intimate friend he had become, he had found a position in a bank where his previous training stood him in good stead, and he was rapidly recovering the self-respect which even in his own estimation he had forfeited.

His letters to his father showed this, and the old man was happier than he had been for many weary months past. The news of Reuben's mended fortunes spread, and it may be that it came to the ears of Ben and Ruth; but if so, neither spoke to the other about it.

It was the one subject which neither ever broached to the other. Ben knew she was not yet indifferent to what became of Reuben, but he could not determine how much she held him in secret remembrance, though there was a depressing fear always in his heart that she had never completely driven her first love from her heart.

She became less capricious as the months went by, and was seldom otherwise than gentle with him. Not with the gentleness of former days, but with a sort of resignation, as if she was preparing herself for a sacrifice which she deemed her duty.

He would have preferred to have drawn out all the wealth of her love upon himself, but in default of that was content to find happiness in the thought that she would some day be his.

He never urged his suit in words, lest he should be premature and arouse a feeling of opposition which lay dormant as long as he was content to remain only a tacit lover.

As it drew near the end of the year, it became known that Reuben was coming home. Ben was greatly disturbed at the thought of meeting Reuben, for in so small a place a meeting was inevitable.

It seemed to him that he could not look at Reuben without feeling an uncontrollable desire to take him by the throat and punish him for his conduct toward Sue. He knew, too, by Ruth's actions, that she had heard of the approaching visit of Reuben, and yet he dare not speak of it.

But something occurred which changed the complexion of the whole matter. Ben was just setting out for Ruth's one afternoon, intending to take her for a sleigh ride, when a message from the telegraph office was handed to him.

A telegram being an unusual thing with him, he tore it slowly open and hesitated with some perturbation before he could open it and read it.

"Susan Eastman dying at Bellevue Hospital. Wants you at once."

Ben read the telegram over several times before he could realize its full meaning. Then a pang of pity and sorrow shot through his heart. There was no question of what he would do. He would go to her on the first train. But there was time to take Ruth for the ride, first.

So he drove over and she went with him. He had not settled in his mind whether to tell Ruth of the telegram or not. It seemed to him that perhaps it would be better not to do so, and although he was several times on the point of doing so, he each time checked himself and refrained.

It was not until they were back to her home that he told her that he was going away for a few days. He did not say where, even; but she turned quickly and looked at him.

"I may be gone for a week," he said, awkwardly. "Important business takes me."

He knew it was lamely done, but he made no further explanation, and she asked him no questions.

When he returned home, he told his father he was going away on business, and then made ready, and had one of the men drive him over to Keene, where he took the train for New York.

Bellevue Hospital was not hard to find, and, with the telegram in his hand, it was not difficult to obtain admission. The house physician met him, and as soon as he had learned Ben's errand, showed a great deal of sympathy.

"Are you her cousin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"She has been so afraid she would die before you reached here!"

"She is really dying, then?"

"She can hardly last through the day. Come with me. You must be prepared to see a great change in her."

"What is the disease?"

"Consumption. What is known as hasty consumption; brought on by exposure."

Ben shuddered as he thought of all there might lie hidden beneath the physician's words. Poor Sue! She was paying a heavy price for her fault. But what of the man who had been the cause of it? The hot blood rushed through his veins at the thought; but a moment later everything was forgotten in the sight of the once beautiful girl, who now lay a shadow of her former robust self, on one of the little cots of the hospital.

She saw him the moment he entered the door of the ward, and she lifted her wasted hand in the effort to beckon to him; but the strength was not there, and it fell feebly on the white sheet.

He ran to her bedside the moment he recognized her, and fell on his knee beside it, with difficulty suppressing the sob that came from his heart.

"I'm so glad you've come!" she whispered.

"Why did you not send sooner?" he asked.

She turned her head, and looked at the nurse who stood on the other side of the bed, and whispered to her:

"You tell him."

Then she closed her eyes with that terrible air of weariness which belongs to the disease, and, except for the painful breathing, she might have been dead.

"She is too sick to talk," the nurse said. "She has told me everything, and I am to talk for her. Is it not so?"

She turned to Sue, who opened her eyes, and made a sign of assent.

Ben took one of the thin hands in his great brown strong ones, and Sue opened her eyes again to smile at him.

"She was brought here a week ago. We knew that she could not live, but she would not believe it at first. After she did, she told me everything, and she wants me to say that she is glad to die."

"So glad!" whispered Sue, without opening her eyes.

"She would not tell me who she was until she was sure she could not last much longer, and then she had you sent for. She wants me to say that Reuben is innocent of any wrong to her, and that she deceived him, and you, and everybody, because she loved him, and hoped she could some day gain him for herself."

"That is true, Ben. I am sorry. Do you forgive me?"

The sick girl's whisper was hardly audible, but Ben heard it, and nodded his head. He could not trust himself to speak.

"Are you married?" whispered Sue.

"No."

"That's right. Ask Reuben and Ruth to forgive me."

"I will."

It was evident that she was speaking with her last breath, for it required almost a convulsion to form the words. She said nothing more, but clung to Ben's hand with all the strength that was in her, as if she could not let him go.

But he had no thought of going. He staid there, thinking it no shame to let the great tears roll down his cheeks. She looked at him now and again, but the struggle, though hard, was not long, and having done what she could to right the wrong she had done, the wayward girl went out of this world.

Ben remained in the city until he had performed his last duty to his cousin, and then returned to Swanzey. He had learned from the nurse a terrible story of poor Sue's sufferings in the great city, and his heart was heavy indeed.

But there was more than the thought of Sue to make him wretched. There was the thought of himself. What would be his fate when he told the story to those who had a right to know?

Ben was an honest man; honest in more than the narrow sense that he had never stolen another man's goods. He

had never intentionally wronged another by word spoken or omitted, by act done or omitted to be done; but now, when he knew that to tell the story he had heard would in all probability lose him the woman he craved to call his wife, he faltered.

The thought came to him that no one would ever know; that he would make Ruth a truer husband than Reuben, who had never valued her at her true worth; and that, after all, it was for her happiness not to say the word which would clear Reuben's name.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE OLD HOMESTEAD ONCE MORE.

It was New Year's Eve and the blazing fire of logs in the chimney of the kitchen at the old homestead, roared in hearty defiance of the biting cold outside, while it danced in merry unison with the chatter of the young people who sat within the circle of its warmth, waiting for the coming of Reuben Whitcomb.

Everybody was there—almost everybody, at any rate. Ben Eastman had not come, nor had Ruth Stratton, though there were her two sisters, as if to show that there was no family feeling in the matter.

Cyrus Prime was there, too; indeed he was a fixture there now, not by reason of having declared his passion for Aunt Tilda, but because his sister Betsy had gone West for a visit and he was staying with Joshua until she returned.

And there, too, was Seth Perkins in all the glory of a gray swallow-tail. He had injudiciously challenged anybody in the room to play him a game of checkers, and instead of Aunt Tilda taking him up, as he had fondly hoped, Cy Prime had responded and had beaten him. And Cyrus had not been too modest to tell everybody that he had done so, to the indignation of Seth.

The Ganzey boy was there, too, as was to be expected, for he had Ricketty Ann's interests very much at heart. He was longer than ever, and had abated nothing of the shrillness of his whistle, notwithstanding the fact that Cyrus, ever since his sojourn with Joshua, had endeavored by all sorts of energetic devices to persuade him that his whistling was not appreciated.

Little Tot was there too, of course, and a very happy little Tot she was, so round and red of cheek that if any of her old city acquaintances had met her they would not have known her. Nor would her own father, which for once in a way would have been a good thing, for he was the least desirable of persons to meet.

Of course everybody was happy. That was evident at a glance. Uncle Josh, very naturally, was a trifle nervous, and poked the fire a great deal more than was good for it, and he fussed about a great deal, but nobody thought anything of that.

Aunt Tilda, too, was nervous, and did her share of fussing. She would be abnormally merry at one moment, and then at the first opportunity to do so, secretly, would have a quiet cry. Once in a while Joshua would catch her at it, and then he would upbraid her and cry with her in the same breath.

But they could not be kept waiting forever, and so, when there came the sudden sound of sleigh-bells, everybody began speculating on whose bells they could be, knowing down in their hearts that there could be no likelihood of their being any other bells but those which would come from Keene, with Reuben behind them.

But nobody stirred until the Ganzey boy came rushing into the room from the outside, where he had relieved his feelings by drawing the fascinating Ricketty Ann about the yard in the old cutter.

"Rube's here!" he cried.

And Reuben proved the truth of his words by darting in through the door immediately after him, and rushing into the arms of his father and Aunt Tilda, who made all kinds of absurd demonstrations of delight over him.

"Put the shed under the horse! Throw a blanket over the barn!" shouted Joshua in incoherent joy.

Then they took Reuben into the sitting-room, where a big stove was throwing out such a heat as shamed the open fire in the kitchen, but could never look as cheery if it was fifty times as hot.

Then, of course, there was a vast amount of talking, of which Reuben did none, for the reason that everybody asked him questions so fast that it would have been impossible to answer more than one-tenth of them, and so he did not attempt to do anything more than smile.

Then Ebenezer Ganzey was dispatched for Len Holbrook, the fiddler, with instructions to bring him even if he had retired to bed. And in the meanwhile the young people played on the melodeon and sang and played games.

But all the while, though he tried to seem to take an interest in what was going on, Reuben was torturing himself with the wonder where Ruth and Ben were, and if they had staid away from scorn of him.

His father was in the kitchen, where he had gone as soon as he had learned that Jack Hazzard was there; but presently he returned and told all the young folks to go out and coast down the hill.

They went in a happy troop, leaving the father and son alone together. For a few moments they looked at each other in silence, as having hearts too full to find utterance, then Joshua cried out:

"I jest can't look at ye 'nough. Rube, boy, haow long be ye goin' to stay?"

The dread of parting again was already on him. Reuben had known it would be so, and, although he had gained the good will of his employers in the city, he had not hesitated as to his course.

"I'm not going back at all, father."

"Yeou mean it, Rube?" cried the old man, tremulously.

"Of course I do, if you will have me here."

"An' work the farm on shares, jest as I proposed 'fore yeou went away?"

"Any way it suits you, father. Father," he began, hesitatingly, "I'd like to know something about Ruth. I'd like to know now, and I won't ask again."

"Ain't ye got over that, Rube? No, I s'pose not; couldn't expect it. Wa-al, I might as well tell yeou fust as last. They do say she's goin' to marry Ben Eastman."

"I thought maybe that was it," said Reuben, sadly.

"Well, it serves me right. I wasn't good enough for her. Ben is more worthy of her than I am."

"More worthy than you!" exclaimed Joshua, hotly.

"He's a mean-sperrited cuss. He held aout that yeou was guilty abaout Sue, even when I told him what yeou'd said."

"I don't wonder at that, father. Sue was his cousin, sister almost, and he would have to take her word for it."

"Thank yeou, Rube," said a voice from the door-way.

Both men turned quickly, and saw Ben standing in the

door-way, with his hat in his hand and his coat on, as if he had just come in and had no intention of staying.

"Thank yeou for sayin' that, Rube," he repeated. "I haven't always been just to you, but I never meant to be anything else. I know naow that I was mistaken. I have seen Sue, an' she told me the hull story. Will yeou shake hands?"

Reuben jumped from his chair, and took the proffered hand and shook it heartily, while the old man was no less eager to do justice to Ben's generous spirit.

"In my heart I always did you justice, Ben," said Reuben; "but I didn't do it in actions, and I want to apologize for that."

"That's all right, Rube. Maybe yeou had more cause than I thought in those days. But I want to say a word about somebody else."

"You needn't," interrupted Reuben, quickly. "I know about it. You mean Ruth. I won't deny that I'd give my life for her love; but I know I have no right to it after all I did, and I wish you good luck, and her, too."

It was all he could do to say it, and when it was done, he turned his head away to hide the emotion which the tremor in his voice betrayed.

"Thank you for that, Rube; it makes my part easier. I wish yeou good luck, too, an' I think yeou deserve it. Anyhow, yeou've got it. Good-by, Rube. Good-by, Uncle Josh."

He left the room and the house, and a moment later they could hear the jingling of his sleigh-bells as he drove off.

"Naow, what did he mean by that?" demanded the old man when he had recovered from his surprise.

There came a soft knock on the door of the sitting-room before Reuben could answer.

"Come in," called out Uncle Joshua.

The door opened, and Ruth, looking very pale and timid, stood in the door-way, as Ben had stood there a few minutes before.

"Ruth," faltered Reuben.

"Hi gun! I guess I'll go look after the fire. Haow be yeou, Ruth?" and the discreet old man bustled past Ruth and shut the door upon the two in the sitting-room.

"I have come to you, instead of waiting for you to come to me. Was that right?" asked Ruth, timidly.

"I—I don't understand, Ruth."

She laughed a little hysterically and said irrelevantly, but with unmistakable meaning:

"Ben brought me over. I thought, maybe, you would take me back."

* * * * *

Is it necessary to say more? Well, Reuben staid at the old homestead, but he did not find it as hard as when he expected to be there without Ruth. Ben Eastman sold his farm, and went West with his father. He must have found consolation for the loss of Ruth, for in the house he lives in there is a little girl named Ruth, and there is a little boy named Reuben; and the mother of the children is never jealous of her husband's old love.

[THE END.]

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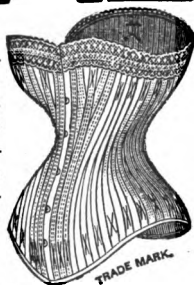
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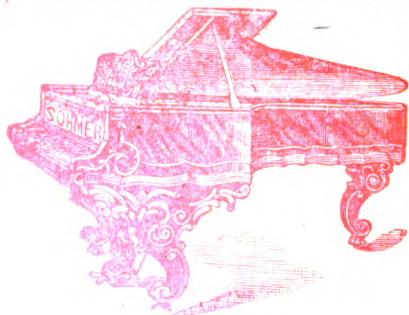
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